



# THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

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**REALITIES REFLECTED AND REFRACTED:  
FEMINISM(S) AND NATIONALISM(S) IN THE  
FICTION OF GHĀDAH AL-SAMMĀN  
AND SAHĀR KHALĪFAH**

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For my parents with much love, respect, and gratitude



## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the literary representations of feminist and nationalist struggles in the Middle East particularly in Lebanon and Palestine. It aims to explore the simultaneous articulation of these two pivotal concerns in contemporary Arabic literature written by Arab women, from the 1960s to the present. One of the primary goals of this thesis is to explore how contemporary feminist literature reflects the effects of national crises in the Middle East on women's status. To this end, this thesis reads closely a number of the novels of two contemporary Arab women writers: Ghādah al-Sammān and Sahār Khalīfah whose work engages in this literary interrelationship of nationalist and feminist struggles in Lebanon and Palestine, respectively. Through the close analyses of these authors' novels, this thesis explores how, in their response to the political turmoil in the Middle East, contemporary Arab women writers render reality in creative forms: al-Sammān cries for freedom by exploiting literary existentialism to reflect the human struggle against the backdrop of the Lebanese civil war, while Khalīfah employs critical realism in her portrayal of the human pain during the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. This thesis argues that both writers challenge long-established literary traditions by advancing these themes in new artistic styles: literary existentialism and realism, and, therefore, considers this a manifestation of the avant-gardism of both writers for they move the writings of Levantine women to a higher level by adding these literary forms to the repertoire of contemporary Arab women's literature. The contribution of this thesis lies in its investigation of the innovative literary styles of these two authors and their place in the writings of contemporary Arab women. Thus, this thesis aims to remedy the neglect of the writings of these authors by presenting close analyses of some of the works of al-Sammān and Khalīfah with a view to understanding their use of literary existentialism and critical realism.



# CONTENTS

Acknowledgement	v
Introduction	1
Part One: Contextualisation	16
Chapter One: Contemporary Arab Women Writers in the Mashriq: Political, Social, and Literary Overview	17
Arab Women in Pre- and Early Islamic Times	19
Political Overview	22
Literary Overview: The Story of Contemporary Arab Women Writers	35
First Generation: The Pioneers	37
Second Generation: The Inward-Looking	48
Third Generation: The Avant-Gardes	59
Conclusion	67
Chapter Two: Vicious Cycle: Conceptualisations of Contemporary Arab Feminisms in the Mashriq	69
Arab Feminism: Terminology and Definition	70
The Development of Literary Feminist Discourse in the Mashriq	76
Thematic Concerns in Feminist Literature in the Mashriq	86
Conclusion	113
Part Two: A Cry for Freedom	115
Chapter Three: Al-Sammān's Quartet: From Anticipation to Perpetuation	116
A Beirut Decentrist	117
Al-Sammān's Quartet	120
Beirut '75	120



Beirut Nightmares	129
The Night of the First Billion	138
Masquerade for the Dead	146
Succinct Notes on Themes and Literary Techniques of the Quartet	153
Conclusion	157
Chapter Four: Ethics and Aesthetics: Literary Existentialism in al-Sammān's Quartet	159
Literary Existentialism: General Overview	159
Existentialism as a Philosophy	160
Existentialism as a Literary Movement	163
General Characteristics of Literary Existentialism	167
Existentialism in Al-Sammān's Quartet	170
Some of the Literary Characteristics of al-Sammān's Pre-1975 Works	170
Al-Sammān's Literary Existentialism	177
Existentialist Features of al-Sammān's Quartet	188
Conclusion	199
Chapter Five: Beyond Tradition: Al-Sammān's Existentialist Feminism and Nationalism	201
Existentialist Arab Feminism	201
Al-Sammān's Feminism	202
Existentialist Arab Feminism in al-Sammān's quartet	208
Existentialist Nationalism	216
Al-Sammān's Nationalism	217
Existentialist Nationalism in al-Sammān's quartet	219
Conclusion	226

Part Three: Narrating Pain and Resistance	228
Chapter Six: Khalīfah's Trilogy: From Al-Shabbār to Bāb al-Sāhah	229
Palestinian Resistance Literature	230
Khalīfah's Trilogy	231
Wild Thorns	233
Sunflower	246
The Gate of the Square	255
Conclusion	265
Chapter Seven: Critical Realism in Khalīfah's Trilogy	268
Literary Realism: General Overview	271
Modes of Literary Realism	280
Critical Realist Features of Khalīfah's Trilogy	292
Conclusion	307
Chapter Eight: Resistance of Verisimilitude: Khalīfah's Realistic Nationalism and Realistic Feminism	309
Verisimilitude in Khalīfah's Trilogy	309
Events	310
Characterisation	315
Stream of Consciousness	319
Setting and Time	321
Language	327
Realistic Nationalism and Realistic Feminism in the Occupied Territories	332
Conclusion	343
Conclusion	345
Bibliography	350



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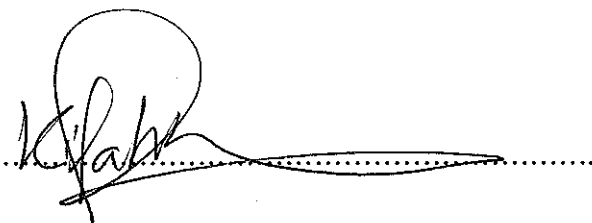
I sincerely thank all my friends in Syria, Edinburgh, and different parts of Europe, Australia, and the United States; you, who are too many to name, I am thankful for your support, love, and encouragement.

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I declare that this thesis has been composed by myself, is of my own work, and has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualifications.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K. Faber', is written over a horizontal dotted line. The signature is stylized with a large loop at the beginning and a long, thin horizontal stroke extending to the right.

22 February 2010



## INTRODUCTION

During the second half of the twentieth century, the social, political, and economic position of women within Arab societies became an important subject of scholarly debate, discussion, and discourse. Issues such as the oppression, sexuality, and liberation of Arab women have been discussed against the conventional background of the traditional Islamic patriarchal society. Evelyne Accad, for instance, in one of the early groundbreaking works on the subject, depicted “the general condition of women in North Africa and the Arab world [as being] deprived of personal and social freedom, subjected successively to the will of their fathers, husbands and sons, economically dependent and intellectually circumscribed.”<sup>1</sup> The prevalence of these conditions in some Arab societies—the Mashriq in particular—has received growing attention from female writers.

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<sup>1</sup> Evelyne Accad, *Veil of Shame: The Role of Women in the Contemporary Fiction of North Africa and the Arab World*, (Sherbrooke: Naaman, 1978), p. 31.



This developing literary and intellectual agency is reflected politically in the desire of Arab women to assume other forms of agency; greater participation within their societies can be seen in the growth of a feminist movement in Egypt. Margot Badran discerns three stages in the history of Egyptian feminism. The first stage—which occurred in the latter decades of the nineteenth century—was fashioned by the writings of some women who manifested a rising “feminist consciousness”<sup>2</sup> that was unfavourable of gender discrimination through the publication of poetry, prose, articles, biographical dictionaries, and essays.<sup>3</sup> This literary act paved the way to “individual and collective forms of public activism”<sup>4</sup> which, according to Badran, forms the last two stages of Egyptian feminism. These early Egyptian feminists were mostly upper- and middle-class urban women and occasionally of rural gentry, such as Zaynab Fawwāz (1860-1914) and ‘Ā’ishah al-Taymūriyyah (1840-1902); their writings reflected their gender awareness and demanded women’s right to education and work.<sup>5</sup>

Although the modern writings of Arab women originated in the last decades of the nineteenth century, it is only recently that these works have attracted the interest of critics and scholars.<sup>6</sup> In the Levant in the late 1950s, the Lebanese Laylā Ba‘albakī (b. 1936) launched what is generally deemed to be the first “revolutionary feminist movement” in Arabic literature.<sup>7</sup> The publication of Ba‘albakī’s novels *Anā Aḥyā* (*I Live*; 1958) and *al-Āliha al-Mamsūkhah* (*The Deformed Gods*; 1960), and collection of

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<sup>2</sup> Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> See Marilyn Booth, *May Her Likes Be Multiplied: Biography and Gender Politics in Egypt*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 19, 23.

<sup>6</sup> See Hanan Awwad, *Arab Causes in the Fiction of Ghādah al-Sammān (1961-1975)*, (Sherbrooke: Naaman, 1983), p. 18.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

short stories *Safīnat Ḥanān ilā al-Qamar* (*Spaceship of Tenderness to the Moon*; 1964) generated major literary and social controversy with its sharp criticism of Arab society, the traditional roles of women, and received ideas about sexuality. Her literary audacity was mirrored by the Syrian Colette Khūrī (b. 1937). Like Ba‘albakī, Khūrī’s approach to the condition of Arab women and the prevalent inequities between Arab men and women did not transcend those limitations of individualist concerns that are primarily applicable to upper-class educated women.<sup>8</sup> Although the expression of such daring views at first attracted almost exclusively negative attention, the writings themselves broke new ground in making the writings of Arab women an object, for the first time, of serious intellectual reflection and criticism.

The political turbulence that different parts of the Arab world—Algeria, Palestine, and Lebanon, to name a few—witnessed during these years added another dimension to the discussion of the position and lives of Arab women: the connection between women and their homeland during times of revolution and war. Such conflicts have, in essence, added a political dimension to the voice and writings of Arab women, since the disruption that national crises bring to traditional social structures allows women access to previously prohibited social and political domains. One of the inevitable outcomes of war and revolution, the absence of men (whether through immigration or martyrdom), has imposed new responsibilities on Arab women, forcing them to adopt non-traditional roles in their society and to participate, in novel ways, in helping their community survive. Women writers have seized such opportunities and used them to describe the effect of wars and national crises on their society in general

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<sup>8</sup> See Accad (1978), pp. 107, 109.

and on their lives in particular, and have thus expanded their discussion of freedom from one focused on the freedom of the individual to one concerned with a more collective freedom that includes other parts of society.

Writing about the Lebanese civil war, Miriam Cooke acknowledges that the “urgency and the violence of the war drove [women writers] to portray some of their most intense, traumatic experiences. . . . These women’s writings reflected the mood of the war and the emergence of a feminist consciousness.”<sup>9</sup> Palestinian women writers experienced similar urgency with the eruption of the first Intifada (Palestinian Uprising) in December 1987. Suhā Šabbagh notes that during the Intifada, the urgent need to protect husbands, brothers, fathers, and children provided women with the impetus to question traditional values. Palestinian women’s “priorities have shifted from protecting the traditional values at all costs to risking everything in order to loosen the grip of occupation.”<sup>10</sup> This transformation generated a new feminist consciousness that is reflected in the fiction of some Palestinian women writers. Here, then, we see how the consciousness of literary feminism in Lebanon and Palestine was propelled by the Lebanese civil war and the Palestinian Intifada.

This transformation of the feminist movement in Arabic literature from a movement concerned with personal freedoms and active social roles into a literary movement embracing social and national awareness has not always received the appreciation it deserves. Accad, for example, describes the attempts of most Arab women writers to represent in fiction their problems and their possible solutions as

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<sup>9</sup> Miriam Cooke, *War’s Other Voices: Women Writers on the Lebanese Civil War*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988; 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1987), pp. 2-3.

<sup>10</sup> Suhā Šabbagh, ‘Palestinian Women Writers and the *Intifada*’, *Social Text*, No. 22. (Spring, 1989), pp. 62-78 (62).

“dilettantish, unrealistic, or escapist.”<sup>11</sup> But while this view may be valid in the case of the writings of early feminists such as Ba‘albakī and Khūrī, the writings of many Arab women in late twentieth century—such as Ḥanān al-Shāykh, Laylā ‘Usayrān, Hudā Barakāt, Liyānah Badr, Ghādah al-Sammān, and Saḥar Khalīfah—reveal the national dimension of the feminist movement in Arabic literature, and show that it is anything but dilettantish, unrealistic, or escapist.

At this point, it is necessary and advantageous to shed light on possible connections between nationalist and feminist movements in the Arab world. The pertinence of the term feminism to the discourse on Arab women has been the focal point of heated debates during the last decades of the twentieth century. Kumari Jayawardena has highlighted the traditionalists’ and conservatives’ allegation of the foreignness of feminism to Third World cultures and pointed out that the consideration of Third World feminism as “merely imitative of Western models”<sup>12</sup> is decidedly Eurocentric. Jayawardena argues that feminism is indeed relevant to Third World cultures, since imperialism, capitalist expansion, and the emergence of a national identity that accompanied Western colonialism raised early on the question about the role and status of women in the Third World. As Jayawardena argues, for example, capitalism’s need for cheap labour drew attention to women, while capitalists

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<sup>11</sup> Accad (1978), p. 31. Accad’s view is based on the fact that Arab women novelists are mostly “those women who have in some way escaped from the condition of their sisters – through wealth, education or expatriation”. (p. 31)

<sup>12</sup> Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, (London: Zed Books Ltd, 1992; 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1986), p. 2.

themselves, armed with Western ideas and the need to serve capitalist economies, spurred the demand for women's rights and emancipation.<sup>13</sup>

Against these expanding forces of capitalism and imperialism, national resistance movements arose in different parts of the Third World, including Arab countries. On the one hand, within these nationalist movements the 'woman question' was constantly debated, not so much to serve the forces of production as to initiate a social reform that would support the new governments. These reforms, however, "had little effect on the daily lives of the masses of women; neither did they address the basic question of women's subordination within the family and in society".<sup>14</sup> Jayawardena emphasises that the reformers were mainly concerned with ensuring that women's education and enlightenment served the nuclear patriarchal family and enhanced the stability of the new social systems while at the same time preserving women's adherence to their traditional cultures, that is, the patriarchal authority. This contradiction continues to pervade contemporary nationalist movements in the Third World.

On the other hand, national movements in different parts of the Arab world have at various times benefited from women's participation in them. Two of the most prominent examples are the demonstrations by upper-class Egyptian women against British colonial rule in Cairo in 1919,<sup>15</sup> and Palestinian women's demonstrations against

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<sup>13</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 5-9.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>15</sup> See Beth Baron, *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 107-134.

Zionist immigration in 1921.<sup>16</sup> I find Jayawardena's argument about the pertinence of feminism to Arab societies and the interrelationship between feminism and nationalism in the Arab world compelling and acknowledge that her analysis has to some extent guided my thinking throughout this thesis.

Yet Arab women's occasional participation in national struggles was not as effective as they hoped. Rita Giacaman and Penny Johnson note that Palestinian women "were propelled by their nationalist sentiments – and in many instances encouraged by society – to deviate from their traditional roles by protesting and even establishing their own organizations. This development was not, however, necessarily accompanied by autonomy for the new women's organizations."<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, the participation of Egyptian and Palestinian women in national struggles has helped to forge an inseparable bond between feminist and nationalist concerns in the modern Middle East, especially the Levant, and highlights the need for social transformation that includes Arab women's emancipation in order to arrive at political and national liberation.

The scope of this thesis is the literary representations of feminist and nationalist struggles in the Middle East particularly in Lebanon and Palestine.<sup>18</sup> It aims to explore the simultaneous articulation of these two pivotal concerns in contemporary Arabic literature written by Arab women, from the 1960s to the present. One of my main

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<sup>16</sup> Julie Peteet, 'Women and the Palestinian Movement: No Going Back?' *MERIP Middle East Report*, No. 138, Women and Politics in the Middle East (Jan.-Feb., 1986), pp. 20-24+44 (20).

<sup>17</sup> Rita Giacaman and Penny Johnson, 'Palestinian Women: Building Barricades and Breaking Barriers', in *Intifada: The Palestinian Uprising Against Israeli Occupation*, Zachary Lockman and Joel Beinin (Eds.), (Boston: South End Press, 1989), pp. 155-163 (158).

<sup>18</sup> It is important to notice the distinction between the Lebanese civil war and the Palestinian struggle: the first is a civil strife with economic, religious, and political dimensions—see Miriam Cooke, *Women Write War: the Centring of the Beirut Decentrists*, (Oxford: Centre for Lebanese Studies, 1987), p. 4—while the latter is an uprising against the Israeli occupation in order to liberate the land—see the Introduction to Suhā Šabbagh (Ed.), *Palestinian Women of Gaza and the West Bank*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), pp. 1-2.

purposes is to explore how contemporary feminist literature reflects the effects of national crises in the Middle East on women's status. I have chosen to investigate these literary representations of feminist and nationalist concerns in the writings of two contemporary Arab women writers: Ghādah al-Sammān (b. 1942) and Saḥar Khalīfah (b. 1941). First, both authors write about women's struggles during the Lebanese civil war and the Palestinian uprising, from within Lebanon and occupied Palestine, respectively.<sup>19</sup> Second, both writers use innovative literary styles to reflect on the social and political realities in the Middle East. According to al-Ṭāhir al-Hammāmī, the Arab bourgeoisie encouraged two kinds of literature (and art in general): realism and imaginative literature, which includes existentialism, absurdity, and surrealism (beyond

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<sup>19</sup> This fact is of extreme importance for setting the demarcations of this dissertation, especially in regard to the Palestinian case, where contemporary Palestinian literature includes the writings of Palestinian authors both in occupied Palestine and in exile. In the context of this dissertation, I chose to focus on resistance Palestinian literature written within the occupied territories. I do not intend to explore the literary production of Palestinian (female) writers in exile (such as Liyānah Badr) or the writings on Palestinian women's struggle in exile—including Khalīfah's *Memoirs of an Unrealistic Woman* (1986) and *The Inheritance* (1997). First, these writings, especially those reflective of Palestinian women's plight in Lebanon during the Lebanese civil war, tackle a different concept of identity: both the writer's sense of identity and Palestinian women's identity in exile as refugees. See Salmā Khaḍrā Jayyūsī (Ed.), *Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), pp. 4-5. Second, writings on the Palestinian diaspora tend to address Palestinian nationalism from a 'transnational' perspective, while the focus of this thesis is the shift from pan-Arab nationalism to territorial nationalism with greater emphasis on the latter, as I will explain in Chapter One. See Therese Saliba, 'A Country Beyond Reach: Liana Badr's Writings of the Palestinian Diaspora', in *Intersections: Gender, Nation, and Community in Arab Women's Novels*, Lisa Suhair Majaj, Paula W Sunderman and Therese Saliba (Eds.), (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2002), pp. 132-161 (134-135). Third, the pace and nature of the literary development of Palestinian literature in exile was 'quicker' than that of the literature written in occupied Palestine, which produced diverse literary styles and subject matters. See Jayyūsī (1992), pp. 18-19. For instance, Palestinian writers in diaspora have broadened their scope to include other Arab affairs; Badr's *A Balcony over the Fakihani* (1983), for example, addresses the lives of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon from the point of view of a Tunisian revolutionary man living in Beirut. A comparative study of the discrepancy between the writings of Palestinian women in occupied Palestine and in exile could be a topic for new research especially in relation to the implementation of realism and existentialism in the writings of contemporary Levantine women authors; limitations of space preclude such an investigation at length here. Therefore, I have chosen to limit my study to female authors who write from within the country in crisis about current national affairs to which they themselves are eyewitnesses and who do so while also inventing new literary trends; in this sense, al-Sammān's and Khalīfah's writings provide perfect examples to illustrate my goals.

realism).<sup>20</sup> He argues that realism and existentialism have essentially the same objective: to reflect reality. He believes that ‘realism’, however, imitates reality as it is, while existentialism falls under ‘imaginative trends’ and implies certain elements of escapism, individualism, and unconsciousness. With al-Sammān and Khalīfah we are therefore dealing with two approaches that have the same goal—to reflect reality—but are essentially polar opposites in the way they try to achieve it: on the one hand, al-Sammān exploits literary existentialism with its relevant imaginative and individualistic characteristics to reflect the human struggle against the backdrop of the Lebanese civil war. On the other hand, Khalīfah employs critical realism with its pertinent features and techniques in order to portray realistically the human pain during the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.<sup>21</sup>

As this thesis will demonstrate, the study of how these writers respectively deploy existentialism and realism in their novels in an attempt to reflect the reality of the feminist and nationalist struggles merits close analysis. The two authors are further united in that by choosing a distinctive literary style that had not yet been used at length by other contemporary Arab women authors they marked themselves as *avant-garde* literary artists. One final and intriguing point of contact between al-Sammān and Khalīfah is, I argue, that both invented a new method of developing and improving their

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<sup>20</sup> al-Ṭāhir al-Hammāmī, *M‘-al-Wāqī‘īyah fī-al-‘Adab wa-l-Fan (Realism in Literature and Art)*, (Tūnis: Dār al-Nashr lil-Maghrib al-‘Arabī, 1984), p. 57.

<sup>21</sup> It is noteworthy that Georg Lukács considers realism and existentialism polar opposites. He particularly examines ‘bourgeois critical realism’ in direct opposition to what he terms ‘decadent bourgeois modernism’ which, according to him, includes existentialism. Although Lukács’s argument is essential to the discussion of critical realism versus socialist realism, I find it irrelevant to the discussion of these two trends in Khalīfah’s writings, for Lukács is mainly concerned in analysing the “ideological and artistic implications [which are] operative within bourgeois literature itself” to which Khalīfah’s literature does not belong. See Georg Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, Trans. John and Necke Mander (London: Merlin Press, 1979), p. 60. In the second part of this thesis, I occasionally refer to Lukács’s analysis when appropriate to the discussion of Khalīfah’s novels.



narrative style by creating, in effect, a sequel of works – a quartet in al-Sammān's case and a trilogy in Khalīfah's. Although each of their novels can be read independently, they demand to be read together as an intense and expansive narrative of a crucial period in the history of the Middle East.

My principal objective in this thesis is thus to highlight the innovative contribution of these two writers to contemporary Levantine women's writing. To that end I focus primarily on the literary existentialism of al-Sammān and the critical realism of Khalīfah, for they are the first Levantine women writers to use either technique. Although many have written useful general studies of the novels of al-Sammān and Khalīfah, no one has yet offered a detailed analysis of the importance of their innovative stylistic approaches to the subjects of feminism and nationalism. This thesis aims to remedy that neglect by presenting close analyses of some of the works of these two contemporary Levantine writers with a view to understanding their use of literary existentialism and critical realism. For example, I attempt to show that literary existentialism is crucial to al-Sammān's portrayal of gender and class discrimination in Lebanon against the backdrop of the Lebanese civil war and that critical realism is similarly important in Khalīfah's depiction of related issues of gender and class struggle during the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Although these analyses focus on regional Levantine nationalism, that is, Lebanese and Palestinian nationalism, I do occasionally mention cultural collective Arab nationalism, for it plays a not insignificant role in the themes and concerns of these two writers, especially al-Sammān.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, I consider al-Sammān and Khalīfah pioneers and exemplary authors for a generation of Levantine

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<sup>22</sup> Al-Sammān is Syrian by birth but expresses Lebanese national affiliation; so that her work can be considered a cultural reflection of her collective Arab nationalism.

women writers because they demonstrated that women could pursue an elevated literary technique while still writing seriously about feminist and nationalist issues. The aesthetic and political dimensions of their work are not viewed as contradictory in this thesis but instead are seen as inseparably linked and mutually reinforcing. Overall, the thesis propounds that an understanding of how both writers achieved this enriching fusion constitutes an important contribution to the study of how Arab women have contributed in innovative ways to contemporary Arabic literature.

This thesis is divided into three parts. Part I consists of two chapters that provide an historical framework for understanding the rise and development of Arab feminism, especially in literature. Chapter One gives a general overview of the major social and political history of the Mashriq, with special emphasis on the events that influenced the rise and development of Arab feminism. Here I propose a new method of classifying Arab women writers, one that still divides them into three generations, but which does so based on the dates of their participation in the literary scene, not the dates of their birth as previously proposed by critics such as Joseph Zeidan, Margot Badran, and Miriam Cooke. In Chapter Two I present a brief conceptualisation of Arab feminism, first linguistically then literarily (both in political and historical terms), thus establishing a working definition of feminism—both as an ideology and as a movement—that I will use in this thesis. Furthermore, I trace here the development of the predominant thematic concerns found in the writings of women in the Mashriq from the rise of feminism early in the twentieth century until the present day, and in doing so I identify the individualist nature of the feminism of the pioneers and the relational aspects of the feminism of the *avant-gardes*. In my examination of the subject matter treated by the

three generations of women writers I seek to highlight the interrelationship between feminism and nationalism in the Mashriq and also to emphasise the *vicious cycle mode* of Arab literary feminism.

Part II of this thesis explores the use of literary existentialism in four of al-Sammān's novels. Chapter Three provides detailed analysis of: *Bayrūt '75* (*Beirut '75*; 1975), *Kawābīs Bayrūt* (*Beirut Nightmares*; 1976), *Laylat al-Milyār* (*The Night of the First Billion*; 1986), and *Sahrah Tanakuriyyah li-l-Mawtā* (*Masquerade for the Dead*; 2003). In this chapter, I argue that although these novels can be read independently, they are stylistically very much a quartet that demands to be read together. Chapter Four presents a general overview of existentialism as a philosophical and literary movement. It also offers some examples of al-Sammān's implementation of certain characteristics of literary existentialism. Chapter Five examines in detail al-Sammān's engagement with literary existentialism and her introductions of what I will term *existentialist Arab feminism* and *existentialist nationalism*.

Part III deals with Khalīfah's literary works. Chapter Six presents close readings of Khalīfah's three novels: *Al-Ṣabbār* (*Wild Thorns*; 1976), *Abbād al-Shams: Takmilat Al-Ṣabbār* (*Sunflower: the Sequel to Wild Thorns*; 1980), and *Bāb al-Sāḥah* (*The Gate of the Square*; 1990). It identifies Khalīfah's three novels as resistance literature and argues that, like al-Sammān, Khalīfah has created three separate works which, although they can be read independently, form a stylistic unity and can profitably be read together as a trilogy. Chapter Seven examines Khalīfah's implementation of certain literary characteristics of critical realism and her subsequent introduction of what I call *realistic nationalism*. Following on this argument, Chapter Eight further proposes

*realistic feminism* as a concept by which to identify Khalīfah's further deployment of critical realism in representing a form of Palestinian feminism.

In this thesis, I focus on the following four areas: (1) the development of both the writings of women in the Mashriq during the twentieth century and the concepts of feminism applicable to these women's writings during this period, (2) the introduction of both al-Sammān and Khalīfah through a new method in sequencing their novels since each of the works under study, although it forms a part of a sequence, can still be read independently, (3) the avant-gardism of both writers, which, as I try to show, lies in their implementation of literary styles and techniques which have not been used yet by other contemporary women (or men) writers, and (4) the different literary approaches and techniques implemented by al-Sammān and Khalīfah so as to pursue their feminist and nationalist causes. This thesis does not compare or contrast the works of these two writers so much as it emphasises the innovativeness of these *avant-gardes* in adopting and redeploying new literary styles instead of reproducing the more traditional literary techniques of Arabic literature.

At this point, it is helpful to identify the issues which this thesis does not intend to explore in depth. Despite the considerable impact of European colonialism in the Middle East on Arabic literature during the last two centuries, this research does not approach contemporary women's literature from a colonial or post-colonial point of view. I intend to dissect the notions of feminism and nationalism in the novels under study through an existentialist and realist aesthetic approach. Yet an overview of the political history of the Middle East, including colonial history, will be provided in Part I to illustrate its effect on the rise of different types of Arab feminisms and nationalisms.

Although this thesis does explore the literary participation of Arab women in a male-dominated field, it does not intend to provide a comparative study of women's literature versus male-authored literature.

The sources of this research include different types of literary historical, thematic, technical, and critical approaches. Some Western feminist criticism will be applied while examining the literary history of Arab women writers and analysing the novels of al-Sammān and Khalīfah. This thesis will not, however, attempt any comparative study of Western and Arab feminisms. Five kinds of Arabic and English sources are used in this research: books, articles in literary journals and edited volumes, published PhD and MA theses, published interviews with these two writers, and introductions to some literary criticism and anthologies. I make occasional reference to pertinent websites.

I have transliterated Arabic according to the guidelines of the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. The names of people and places are also transliterated according to this system. The title of an Arabic novel or book is transliterated and followed by its translation and date of first publication only at its first mention in each chapter. Any misquotation or misinterpretation remains entirely my own responsibility. This thesis will contribute to a better understanding and evaluation of the contribution of contemporary Arab women writers, the literary representation of Arab women's social and political roles, and most importantly the innovative, but seldom investigated, implementation of existentialism and realism by al-Sammān and Khalīfah. Therefore, I intend this thesis to be useful to students and scholars of Arabic literature, the writings of contemporary Arab women, and literary feminism and

nationalism. In addition, this study will contribute to scholarship on the aesthetics of women's writings on war, as well as widening the geographical and political scope of interpretations of literary existentialism and critical realism as modern literary movements.



## **PART ONE**

### **CONTEXTUALISATION**

In the first part of this thesis I shall contextualise the rise and development of Arab literary feminism by providing a general overview of the political, social, and literary history of the Mashriq during the twentieth century. In Chapter One, I trace the emergence of the writings of Arab women and classify the most prominent of them into three generations according to the dates of their participation in the literary scene and their linkage to women's rights. In Chapter Two, I elaborate this classification more fully by studying the conceptualisation of Arab feminism and the dynamism of feminist discourse through an examination of Arab feminism as an ideology and a movement.





# CHAPTER ONE

## CONTEMPORARY ARAB WOMEN WRITERS IN THE MASHRIQ: POLITICAL, SOCIAL, AND LITERARY OVERVIEW

Although the feminist movement in the Middle East emerged during the last decades of the nineteenth century, many factors have affected, and continue to affect, this movement. For example, changing social and political conditions in the Arab world play a prominent role in the development and sustainability of feminism in the Middle East. In this thesis I focus mainly on two Levantine countries: Lebanon and Palestine. Two considerations, however, have led me to broaden the historical, political, and social background of the Levant to include Egypt. First, geographically it is widely viewed as a Mashriq country;<sup>1</sup> secondly, it was in Egypt that feminism in the nineteenth century flourished and continued to flourish, for later in “the 1920s, 1930s, and early 1940s only

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<sup>1</sup> Egypt was, and still is, one of the most important cultural and political countries in the modern history of the Arab world. As I shall attempt to demonstrate in the following historical overview, the first encounter between the Mashriq and Europe—politically, educationally, and culturally—occurred in Egypt. The literary influence passed on to Syria firstly through the Egyptian occupation of Syria, and secondly through their union as United Arab Republic from 1958 until 1961. Thus, early in the twentieth century, Egypt and Syria (which then formed one political entity with Lebanon and Palestine) were considered the two leading intellectual centres of the *Nahḍah*—that is, the cultural renaissance—in modern Arabic literature in the Mashriq, in which Arab women had a remarkable contribution. In this sense, I adopt the term ‘the Mashriq’ used by Badran and Cooke where Mashriq includes Egypt in a broader sense than the Levant. See the introduction to Margot Badran, Miriam Cooke (Eds.), *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing*, (London: Virago Press Limited, 1990), pp. xxiv-xxv. See also M. M. Badāwī, ‘The Background’, in *Modern Arabic Literature*, M. M. Badāwī (Ed.), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 1-23 (1, 12).

in independent Egypt was there space for a highly visible, organized feminist movement.”<sup>2</sup>

This thesis explores the literary aspect of contemporary Arab<sup>3</sup> feminism in the Mashriq and its connection to, and reflection of, nationalist movements in the region through close readings and analyses of some of the writings of two contemporary Arab women writers: Ghādah al-Sammān and Saḥar Khalīfah. In order to reach this objective, it is essential to shed light on the early stages of the feminist movement in the Mashriq by tracing its roots in the history of the region. Thus a historical overview of the political, social, and literary conditions that affect the contemporary Arab feminist movement is provided. Beginning with its inception and rise and continuing to the present day, I seek to trace the link between the feminist and nationalist movements in the literary works of women writers from the Mashriq. A brief summary of Arab women’s literary and political activities in pre-Islamic and early Islamic eras is given in order to highlight that the activism of Arab women is not confined to modern history. This will be followed by a political overview of the most important events in the Mashriq during the twentieth century and its effect on Arabic literature generally and women’s writings specifically. In the third section, I propose a new method of presenting women writers in the Mashriq where I provide a chronological account of women writers whose literary contributions have made a significant feminist impression

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<sup>2</sup> Badran (1995), p. 223.

<sup>3</sup> In the context of this thesis, I use ‘Arabic’ to describe mainly the language, literature, novel, and culture. I use ‘Arab’ to refer to all other social and cultural aspects such as Arab feminism, Arab nationalism, and Arab women; the latter is used to generally refer to women across the Arab world (from Morocco in the west to Arab states of the Persian Gulf in the east, and from the Mediterranean Sea in the north to the horn of Africa and the Indian Ocean in the southeast) in comparison to Levantine women (women in Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan), and Middle Eastern women (which in some political contexts broadly includes the Arab world, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan).

during a certain period of time and classify these authors into three generations based on the dates of their participation in the literary scene and their association with women's rights.

### **ARAB WOMEN IN PRE- AND EARLY ISLAMIC TIMES**

In the contemporary Arab world, attention has been increasingly drawn to women's activism. Women's participation in the literary, social, and political domains is considered a recent trend which came into existence in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Yet the activism of Arab women and their participation in the process and development of their societies, including the literary and political domains, are not new to history I find it necessary to shed light on the activism of Arab women in pre-Islamic times as part of the following literary history in order to accentuate this long-established (yet often neglected) tradition and highlight the occasional absence of this practice at different times in recent history due to the rising of patriarchal societies and subsequent political and social changes in the Arab world, especially the Mashriq.

For instance, in pre-Islamic times Arab "women participated in the wars which erupted among the Arab tribes. They served as nurses and as suppliers of water and food, but their most important function was to inspire the warriors in the midst of battle."<sup>4</sup> Likewise, Arab women have always played leading roles in their societies.

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph Tufek Zeidan, *Women Novelists in Modern Arabic Literature*, Ph.D. Diss., (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1982), p. 5.

Mention has been made of women like ‘Ā’ishah Bint Abi Bakr,<sup>5</sup> Queen Shajarat al-Durr, Queen Zanūbyah, and the brave fighter Khawlah bint al-’Zwar al-Kindī<sup>6</sup>, who are famous for their outstanding presence in the political history of their times.

Within the literary tradition, Arab women undertook the task of transmitting oral literature and poetry, of which we have no material evidence from the pre-Islamic era. They undertook the ritual of composing elegies for the dead, which is still valid to the present day in some parts of the Arab world.<sup>7</sup> In this field, mention should be made of the renowned al-Khansā’ (A.D. 600-670);<sup>8</sup> a poetess from pre-Islamic times, whose poetry is the “only woman’s verse transmitted to us as a full body of poetry”.<sup>9</sup> The contribution of al-Khansā’ to the body of Arabic literature is considered exceptional in the sense that she herself was an extraordinary woman (because of her literary and political status) who could challenge the social marginality of women of her time and take part in the predominantly masculine tradition of Arabic literature.<sup>10</sup> This

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<sup>5</sup> See Elizabeth Warnock Fernea and Basima Qattan Bezirgan (Eds.), *Middle Eastern Muslim Women Speak*, The Dan Danciger publication series (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988; 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1977), pp. 27-35.

<sup>6</sup> Badran and Cooke (1990), pp. 230-1. Transliteration is mine.

<sup>7</sup> For more information about the oral traditions see Hilary Kilpatrick, ‘Women and Literature in the Arab World: the Arab East’, in *Unheard Words: Women and Literature in Africa, the Arab World, Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America*, Mineke Schipper (Ed.), (London: Allison & Busby, 1985), pp. 72-90 (73). See also the introduction to Badran and Cooke (1990), pp. xxviii-xxix.

<sup>8</sup> For more information on the biography of al-Khansā’ see Fernea and Bezirgan (1988), pp. 3-4. See also Bouthaina Shaaban, *Mi’at ‘Ām min al-Riwāyah al-Nisā’iyah al-‘Arabīyah: 1899-1999 (A Hundred Years of Arab Women Novelists: 1899-1999)*, (Bayrūt: Dār al-Ādāb, 1999), p. 28.

<sup>9</sup> Salmā Khadrā Jayyūsī, ‘Modernist Arab Women Writers: A Historical Overview’, in *Intersections: Gender, Nation, and Community in Arab Women’s Novels*, Lisa Suhair Majaj, Paula W Sunderman and Therese Saliba (Eds.), (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2002), pp. 1-30 (2).

<sup>10</sup> For more information about al-Khansā’ and her literary legacy, see Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Woman’s Body, Woman’s Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 128 & 146. See also Radwa Ashour, Ferial J. Ghazoul and Hasna Reda-Mekdashī (Eds.), *Arab Women Writers: A Critical Reference Guide 1873-1999*, (Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2008), p. 1. Zeidan highlights the independence of al-Khansā’ and how she had her say in matters of marriage and divorce. See Joseph T. Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists: the Formative Years and Beyond*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 10.

demonstrates the literary and political activities of Arab women since the pre-Islamic era.

Arab women carried on such activities during the early Islamic period. They played important parts in literary and artistic fields as poets, singers, connoisseurs of poetry and patronesses.<sup>11</sup> Women like Sukaīnah bint al-Ḥusān, a great granddaughter of the Prophet, who was a well-known intellectual during the first century of Islam, is famous for her own literary salon.<sup>12</sup> One comes across other names like Rābi‘ah al-‘Adawyyah—a poet from the eighth century famous for her mystical, spiritual verse<sup>13</sup>—and Queen Zubaīdah from medieval Abbasid times, who is famous for the lyrical correspondence she had with the Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd.<sup>14</sup> Arab women like the above-mentioned managed to make remarkable contributions to the male dominated literary terrain. Yet the task of proving themselves as literary figures was not an easy one. Their achievements, though limited, might be attributed to the fact that their art and language resembled that of their male contemporaries, that is, they were accepted by the patriarchal criteria.<sup>15</sup> However, it was a remarkable contribution if we bear in mind its historical timing.

The different regimes and political events of the last two centuries in the Arab world have naturally affected the literary scene generally and the phenomenon of Arabic novel specifically, including women’s writings. As I explore in the following chapters, the genre of the Arabic novel became accepted in the period after World War

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<sup>11</sup> Kilpatrick, ‘Women and Literature’, p. 73.

<sup>12</sup> For more information about the contribution of Sukaīnah bint al-Ḥusān to the literary scene of her early times, see Jayyūsī, ‘Modernist Arab Women Writers’, pp. 2, 6.

<sup>13</sup> For more information on al-‘Adawyyah’s biography see Fernea and Bezirgan (1988), pp. 37-66.

<sup>14</sup> For more information about Queen Zubaīdah, see the introduction to Badran and Cooke (1990), p. xxix.

<sup>15</sup> See Zeidan (1995), pp. 42-3, where he examines al-Khansā’ as an example of those early Arab women whose poetry met the satisfaction of male-established literary standards.

II, while the turmoil following the 1967 June war fostered conditions under which Arab women could fruitfully pursue their literary endeavours. Yet most, if not all, forms of literary expression in the Arab world were, and still are, highly affected by, and reflective of, the prevalent political situation. Thus a brief political history is important to provide for the understanding of the development of Arab women's writings. The following section will point out the most important incidents in the political history of the Mashriq. Reference will be made later to this brief historical overview and its effects on Arabic literature in general and Arab women's writings in particular.

### **POLITICAL OVERVIEW**

Deniz Kandiyoti acknowledges that "one of the most salient features of [feminist] scholarship in the region is that it has evolved against a background of highly politicized and emotionally charged reflection on key political events and turning points which exert a potent, if sometimes subterranean, influence."<sup>16</sup> Thus a chronicle of major political events in the region is necessary for the understanding of the Arab feminist movement. Since this thesis focuses on the feminist and nationalist aspects of contemporary Arab women's writings, this overview will shed light on the impacts of these political events on Arab nationalism and the literary domain. It is helpful to give the argument a wider framework and to begin from the time of the Ottoman Empire.

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<sup>16</sup> Deniz Kandiyoti, 'Contemporary Feminist Scholarship and Middle East Studies', in *Gendering the Middle East: Emerging Perspectives*, Deniz Kandiyoti (Ed.), (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996), pp. 1-27 (8).

The rule of the Ottoman Turks over almost all the Arab world for nearly 400 years, from early in the sixteenth century until early in the twentieth century, affected the political and economic life of the whole area. In the Ottoman Empire, Arabic language and culture were sidelined, relegating Arabic literature to one of its lowest stages in history. Since literature is traditionally considered the mirror of its society, Arabic literature during the Ottoman Empire “was a literature of an exhausted, inward-looking culture, albeit a complacent and perfectly self-satisfied one.”<sup>17</sup> Yet it is under the realm of the Ottoman Turks—during the late stages of the Ottoman Empire around the end of nineteenth century—that Arab nationalism blossomed. Yasir Suleiman highlights this fact in his study of the Arabic language and national identity: “Arab nationalism developed in the Levant first while under Ottoman rule, and only later found its way to other parts of the Arabic-speaking world.”<sup>18</sup>

Albert Hourani states that despite those earlier “stirrings of national self-consciousness . . . the idea of nationalism became explicit”<sup>19</sup> during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (especially in the writings of reformers such as Muḥammad ‘Abduh and Rashīd Riḍā). It is worth mentioning that one of the very early stimuli of Arab nationalism was provided by the French during the French campaign in Egypt in 1798, which ended this period of isolation and its conceited self-satisfaction. In spite of the Egyptians’ rejection of the French doctrines simply because they contrasted with the Islamic Ottoman system, the French campaign, during its three years in Egypt,

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<sup>17</sup> Badāwī, ‘The Background’, p. 3. For more information about ‘The Ottoman Period’ see pp. 2-3 in the same chapter.

<sup>18</sup> Yasir Suleiman, *The Arabic Language and National Identity: A Study in Ideology*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), p. 11.

<sup>19</sup> Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 309.



succeeded in opening the closed shell of Arabic culture to the West, a world with which the Arabs of that time had no previous and extensive contact. The seeds of modernisation were planted at the specific time of “the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt in 1798 [which] heralded the onset of [a modernizing input] on both the political and cultural fronts in Egypt itself and, indirectly, beyond Egypt in the Arabic-speaking lands.”<sup>20</sup> On the cultural front, Bonaparte introduced printing in Egypt for the first time through the Arabic press which he brought. Besides, Egyptian intellectuals and Muslim scholars were exposed to the literature and science brought by the French and encouraged to take part in the administrative system.<sup>21</sup>

Although this process did not produce an indigenous literary body, the French campaign moved the rule of the Arab world from the Ottoman Turks to European dominance, especially French and British.<sup>22</sup> While the Islamic nature of the Ottoman Empire did not necessarily inspire the national feelings of Arabs, during the French campaign in Egypt, Arab national affiliation came to the surface during the struggle against the Western colonisation of some Arab countries. This fact is illustrated by Suleiman who identifies two types of national identity which exist in the Arab Middle East: cultural and political.<sup>23</sup> He, however, acknowledges that “Arab nationalism first started as a cultural phenomenon . . . but later developed into a more overtly political movement at the beginning of the twentieth century.”<sup>24</sup> Thus the national affiliation

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<sup>20</sup> Suleiman (2003), p. 69.

<sup>21</sup> See Trevor J. Le Gassick, *Major Themes in Modern Arabic Thought: An Anthology*, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1979), pp. 2-3

<sup>22</sup> Badāwī, ‘The Background’, p. 5.

<sup>23</sup> Suleiman (2003), pp. 6-7.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 70. This fact is emphasised by Hourani who states that “as an articulate idea animating *political movements* [national self-consciousness] became important only in the last two decades before the First World War.” Hourani (1991), p. 309.

aroused in Egypt as a reaction against Western colonisation falls under the category of cultural nationalism.

The rule of Muḥammad ‘Alī in Egypt (1805-1848) after the withdrawal of the French brought the whole region into a different era. He imposed enormous economic, political, and social changes in Egypt as part of his plan to strengthen the country and build it up by means of developing the education system. Besides introducing an Arabic printing press, Muḥammad ‘Alī opened the first missionary schools for girls and sent locals on scholarly missions to Europe, mainly to France. The new education system that pious Muslim reformists brought from the West and implemented in Egypt helped to provide a better and more promising future for Egyptian women, for it offered them opportunities of education and work that their traditional culture did not provide. Through such strategic achievements, Muḥammad ‘Alī started a new era of modernisation in which Egypt witnessed a remarkable promotion of its cultural history which spread later to other Arab countries, especially those of the Levant during the Egyptian occupation of Syria. This course of Westernisation was continued by his grandson Ismā‘īl, who was educated in France. During Ismā‘īl’s rule more educational opportunities were offered to Arab girls and women.<sup>25</sup>

The elements from the West that Muḥammad ‘Alī introduced greatly affected the Arabic novel; the clash between these two different cultures became a standard theme for many Arab writers. It is the influence of the West, however, that helped to

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<sup>25</sup> For more information about ‘Muḥammad ‘Alī’s Period’ see Badāwī, ‘The Background’, pp. 6-11. See also Le Gassick (1979), pp. 6-7 and Hourani (1991), pp. 273-4, 304.

bring Arab women's issues to light.<sup>26</sup> As early as 1849, the Lebanese Buṭrus al-Bustānī (1819-1883), one of the most prominent pioneers of Arab renaissance, instigated the call for the education for both men and women with a special emphasis on women's education.<sup>27</sup> Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq (1804-1887) is another example of a liberal thinker who—in the mid-nineteenth century—launched calls for women's equality with men by granting them the rights to education, work, to choose their husbands, and to divorce.<sup>28</sup> In his book *al-Sāq 'Ālā al-Sāq (Leg on Leg; 1855)*—a masterpiece of autobiography, travel writing, sexual literature, narrative, and the Maqāmah<sup>29</sup>—al-Shidyāq went further than his liberal predecessor al-Bustānī to defend “women's equal right to sexual pleasure, even justifying extra-marital relations!”<sup>30</sup> In Egypt, Rifā'ah al-Taḥṭāwī (1801-1873) was one of the earliest Arab thinkers during the last decades of the nineteenth century to advocate, though quietly, women's rights of education and freedom of choice.<sup>31</sup> Nonetheless, the issue of Arab women's suppression and subordination was initiated literarily and more openly by Qāsim Amīn (1865-1908) with the publication of his book *Taḥṭīr Al-Mar'ah (The Liberation of Women; 1899)*. It

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<sup>26</sup> Zeidan states that the “position of women in Islam has been the subject of heated controversy among Muslim intellectuals ever since they were exposed to modern Western civilization.” Zeidan (1995), p. 12.

<sup>27</sup> See Buṭrus al-Bustānī, ‘Khiṭāb fī Ta’līm al-Nisā’ ’ (‘Allocution on the Education of Women’), in *Al-Jam’iyyah al-Sūriyyah lil-‘Ulūm wa-al-Funūn 1847-1852*, Buṭrus al-Bustānī (Ed.), (Bayrūt: Dār al-Ḥamrā’, 1990), pp. 45-53. In this speech, al-Bustānī highlights the evils of illiteracy and explains how education does not contrast with religion and social conduct.

<sup>28</sup> Fawaz Traboulsi, Aziz al-Azmeh (Eds.), *Silsilat al-‘A’ māl al-Majhūlah: Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq (The Unknown Works Of Ahmad Faris ash-Shidyāq)*, (London: Riad El-Rayyes Books Ltd, 1995), p. 34.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>30</sup> Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon*, (London: Pluto Press, 2007), p. 67. See also Traboulsi and al-Azmeh (1995), pp. 32-36.

<sup>31</sup> See Le Gassick (1979), p. 8. See also Matti Moosa, *The Origins of Modern Arabic Fiction*, (Boulder & London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1997), p. 8.

is worth mentioning that this modernisation challenged the long-established culture, especially attitudes to women.<sup>32</sup>

Lila Abu-Lughod sets out the case of Japan as an example of Westernisation in the East. She argues that Japanese women “figured in this discourse in complex ways, as proof that a civilization, to advance, must educate its women, but also that one could modernize women without undermining social hierarchies and morality.”<sup>33</sup> Arab liberal intellectuals such as Amīn and his colleagues aimed at such modernity, a modernity that can be described as “an alternative modernity, a modernity that was not Western.”<sup>34</sup> The modernity in question was intended to adopt *some* of the educational aspects of Western civilisations while preserving the cultural aspects of Arab societies as well as Islamic trends. The modernity of these reforms can therefore be seen as an amalgamation of Western models and indigenous Arabic culture.

Yet this trend towards modernisation could not entirely succeed as it was faced with the opposition of “petite bourgeois intellectuals”<sup>35</sup> and traditionalists, and therefore was suppressed and gradually sidelined.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, the reformers’ attempt to improve the situation of Arab women by learning from the West has led to the (surprisingly

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<sup>32</sup> See Le Gassick (1979), p. 38.

<sup>33</sup> Lila Abu-Lughod, ‘Feminist Longings and Postcolonial Conditions’, in *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*, Lila Abu-Lughod (Ed.), (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 3-31 (15).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>35</sup> Juan Ricardo Cole, ‘Feminism, Class, and Islam in Turn-of-the-Century Egypt’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 4, (Nov., 1981), pp. 387-407 (393).

<sup>36</sup> An example of such opposition is the initial reactions to Amīn’s *The Liberation* which according to Booth “centered on accusations against its author: the book represented satanically inspired, corrupt thought; it was one of the schemes the British concocted to consolidate further their 1882 occupation of Egypt; it was a result of the writer’s ‘upbringing’ in Europe and desire to resemble Europeans; it was Christian propaganda for the purpose of eradicating all ‘honor and religion’ that the Muslims retained; it was a tool in the ‘Eastern Question,’ a process . . . that had begun with the Crusades.” Marilyn Booth, ‘Woman in Islam: Men and the “Women’s Press” in Turn-of-the-Century Egypt’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 33 (2001), pp. 171-201 (177).

prevalent) assumption that feminism is foreign to Arabic culture and traditions.<sup>37</sup> The aforementioned historical overview and the following literary survey, however, help to correct this misconception by acknowledging the “multiple roots” of feminism in the Mashriq early in the twentieth century—which critics such as Booth and Badran consider neither “derivative” nor “alien”<sup>38</sup>—and by pointing out the partial impact of Westernisation on Egyptian feminism.<sup>39</sup> It also helps to reclaim, at least partially, the indigenusness of Arab feminism and to reassert its relevance to Arabic culture and societies in the sense that it is reflective of, and ensued from, the different political and social changes that occurred in the Arab world over the last century in particular.<sup>40</sup>

In spite of this, Islamic reformers and modernisers, like Amīn, disagreed with conservative Islamists in Egypt in regard to women’s emancipation. These reformers emphasised the necessity of women’s liberation for the general progress of Muslims and argued that women’s emancipation is not against Islamic doctrine.<sup>41</sup> Amīn’s *Taḥnīr Al-Mar’ah* (*The Liberation of Women*; 1899) is considered the origin of feminist debates in

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<sup>37</sup> See Nawar al-Hassan Golley, ‘Is Feminism Relevant to Arab Women?’, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No 3, (2004) pp. 521-536 (529). See also introduction to Badran and Cooke (1990), p. xx.

<sup>38</sup> See Booth (2001), p. xxvii. See also Badran (1995), p. 20.

<sup>39</sup> Booth states that: “[t]o consider the reformist discourses on women as wholly derivative of European colonial discourse is to reproduce a line of attack that was taken up by opponents of these discourses at the time. This does not mean, of course, that either women’s material conditions or colonialism as doctrine and political practice was irrelevant to the shape these discourses took, for they were shaped partly by local encounters with European colonial agendas.” Booth, ‘*Woman in Islam*’, p. 175.

<sup>40</sup> Juan Ricardo Cole illustrates the effects of the political and social changes on the Egyptian class divisions and the latter’s impact on the rise of feminism toward the end of the nineteenth century. See Cole, ‘Feminism’, pp. 387-392.

<sup>41</sup> Badāwī, ‘The Background’, p. 13. Qāsim Amīn belonged to Muḥammad ‘Abduh’s school of eclecticism. ‘Abduh was an influential follower of the Muslim thinker Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī yet more moderate than his teacher. The last two thinkers belong to the generation of Arab intellectuals who helped to improve the education system in Egypt and who witnessed the cultural and social problems resulted from the implementation of the new education system by Muḥammad ‘Alī. For more information see *ibid.*, pp. 7-8, 12-13. On the literary collaboration between ‘Abduh and Amīn see Zeidan (1995), p. 18, and note 20, pp. 273-4.

the Arab world.<sup>42</sup> Its importance stems from the fact that “[f]or the first time in Arab history we are face to face with a highly systematic analysis of the Muslim woman’s quest for liberation.”<sup>43</sup> Though written by a male reformer, Amīn’s *The Liberation of Women* along with his second book *Al-Mar’ah Al-Jadīdah* (*The New Woman*; 1901) are considered as major catalysts in launching the first Arab feminist critique. Despite the argument of some feminist scholars that the woman question in Egypt had been raised by other critics and reformers,<sup>44</sup> including women, before Amīn’s books appeared, I agree with Booth that

to emphasize that [Amīn] was neither the first nor the only individual to raise this issue risks minimizing the fact that it was Amin’s [*sic*] work that generated a furious and more public debate on gender than had been the case before. It was commentators at the time, not simply historians writing later, who gave his books precedence – including commentators who were knowledgeable about and sympathetic to women’s own contributions to the public debate.<sup>45</sup>

The importance of Amīn’s works, therefore, lies not only with their treatment of the woman question in Egypt, but also with the way in which they “generated” those “furious” debates (to borrow Booth’s words) that in turn drew considerable attention to the woman question.

In these two works, which were widely available via the press<sup>46</sup>, Amīn discusses the relationship between women and men in society and calls for women’s

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<sup>42</sup> See Badran and Cooke (1990), p. xix. See also Zeidan (1995), p. 16.

<sup>43</sup> Zeidan (1982), p. 28.

<sup>44</sup> Badran, for instance, mentions that “[s]triking similarities” of Amīn’s *The Liberation of Women* to Murqus Fahmī’s four-act play *Al-Mar’ah fī Al-Sharq* (*The Woman in the East*) 1894, “suggest that Amin, and Muhammad ‘Abduh, Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid, and others who are said to have had a hand in the book, were familiar with *The Woman in the East*.” Badran (1995), p. 18.

<sup>45</sup> Booth, ‘*Woman in Islam*’, pp. 177-8.

<sup>46</sup> According to Booth, Ibrahim Ramzi’s ‘*Woman in Islam*’ was one of the main outlets of Amīn’s two books and his responses to critics. See Booth, ‘*Woman in Islam*’, p. 177.

emancipation and illumination as a necessity “if Muslim society was to function more effectively.”<sup>47</sup> It is worth mentioning, however, that Amīn’s calls for women’s liberation were not favoured by some nationalists who claimed that such calls for liberating women as part of social reformation undermined the main cause of liberating Egypt from the British.<sup>48</sup>

Like Amīn, there were other liberal male intellectuals and Islamic reformers in Egypt such as Luṭfī al-Sayyid, Muḥammad ‘Abduh, and Rashīd Riḍā.<sup>49</sup> In their calls for women’s emancipation, these reformers and modernisers emphasised the importance of women’s education to the family and to society as a whole.<sup>50</sup> It is noteworthy that the appeals for women’s education were more emphasised during the colonial periods towards the end of the nineteenth century in Egypt. These reformers launched for the first time a connection between liberating women and resistance against the coloniser where education for women was regarded as necessary means to strengthen the society against the European colonial powers.<sup>51</sup> Although these feminist demands were set within the context of social reform, they highlight the early connection between nationalist trends and feminist ones in the Mashriq.

These initial calls for women’s emancipation took another dimension as political developments in the Mashriq necessitated further changes. Arab protectorates which

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<sup>47</sup> Zeidan (1982), p. 34.

<sup>48</sup> Philipp sets Ṭal‘at Ḥarb and Muṣṭafā Kāmīl as examples of Egyptian nationalists who opposed women’s emancipation. See Thomas Philipp, ‘Feminism and Nationalist Politics in Egypt’, in Lois Beck and Nikki Keddie (Eds.), *Women in the Muslim World*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), pp. 279-80.

<sup>49</sup> For a brief summary of these Islamic reformers’ concept of modernisation see Hourani (1991), pp. 307-8.

<sup>50</sup> Miriam Cooke, ‘Arab Women Writers’, in *Modern Arabic Literature*, M. M. Badāwī (Ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 443-462 (443-4).

<sup>51</sup> See Zeidan (1995), pp.19-20.

were under the control of different European forces started gaining their independence between 1932 and 1962. However, the British mandate in Palestine in 1920 was followed by the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. This event formed a crucial turning point in the history of the region in the twentieth century. The loss of Palestine affected the whole Arab world. The awareness of the Israeli threat created a collective nationalism which brought all Arabs together and is powerfully reflected in the writings of numerous modern Arab writers.<sup>52</sup> This collective nationalist affiliation could also be considered to have a cultural and ethnic dimension (according to Suleiman's definition mentioned above) in the sense that it is not confined to Arabs from a particular political state; rather it includes Arabs who regard the loss of Palestine as a violation against all Arabs regardless of territorial boundaries.

Four years later, in 1952, the Egyptian army coup occurred under the leadership of Gamal Abdul Nasser. The subsequent rise of Nasserism was accompanied by the rise of new Arab nationalism and Arab socialism.<sup>53</sup> In his call for Arab unity, Nasser underlined "the unity of language, history and aspirations (in this order) between the various Arab peoples [which] reveals the unity of the Arab nation and point to its ability to overcome the political differences between the Arab states."<sup>54</sup> By this Nasser calls for collective Arab nationalism which counters Arab territorialism,<sup>55</sup> though by adding a political dimension to the existing cultural one. Yet the growth of Arab nationalism and socialism in this period was accompanied by developments in educational practice, and

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<sup>52</sup> Badāwī, 'The Background', pp. 14-15. See also Jayyūsī (1992), p. 16.

<sup>53</sup> On the rise and development of Arab nationalism and socialism see Hourani (1991), pp. 401-7.

<sup>54</sup> Suleiman (2003), p. 125.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 124. See also Hourani (1991), pp. 411-12.



more awareness of the importance of women's participation in the new régimes.<sup>56</sup> Once more, such changes are reflected in the writings of Arab writers, both men and women.

The Arab defeat of 1967 was another political moment which imposed a decisive sense of collective Arab affiliation and which was once more reflected in Arabic literature; this time with the participation of more women writers. The harsh reality of the setback and the painful disillusionment of writers with the attitudes of Arab leaderships were notable in the literature of this period. In general, this event marks a clear demarcation of thematic literary as well as political concerns not only of Arab writing in general but of feminist writing in particular. Women's writings of that period bore witness to an increased awareness of the political conditions of communities. After the 1967 defeat, women's literature expressed a departure from the traditional feminist calls for women's recognition with an obvious impulse towards exploring a deeper sense of human suffering and collective Arab affiliation; this will be further illustrated in the following chapters.

The political turbulence that followed the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war in 1975 had major repercussions for Arabic literature. The establishment of Israel and the loss of Palestine resulted in enormous numbers of Palestinian refugees seeking refuge first in the neighbouring Arab countries (such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria), and then across the world. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was expelled from 'Ammān by King Hussein of Jordan after the violent fights of Black September in 1970 and moved its headquarters to Lebanon.<sup>57</sup> A few years later Lebanon witnessed the

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<sup>56</sup> Badāwī, 'The Background', p. 14.

<sup>57</sup> See Robert Fisk, *Pity the Nation: Lebanon at War*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 19. See also Hourani (1991), p. 430.

horror of a bloody civil strife: ostensibly because of the existence of several religious minorities in a geographically small area but also influenced by rapid economic, political, and social changes in Lebanon and the surrounding Arab states, as well as the unsettled situation of the Palestinians in Lebanon.<sup>58</sup> It is this history that led Lebanon and Palestine to share nearly the same political and social destiny. The horror of the Lebanese civil war and the continuous fight of the Palestinians against the Israeli occupation forces drove Lebanon and Palestine to a certain kind of shared national struggle as the political chaos in these two neighbouring countries took place in the same historical period. This overlapping Palestinian/Lebanese national struggle forms one of the major thematic concerns of contemporary Arabic literature. Hence the focus of this thesis is on al-Sammān and Khalīfah who reflect in their writings the Lebanese and Palestinian national crises, respectively, from within Lebanon and occupied Palestine.

However, this shared history of national struggle is an extremely complex one. During the terrible civil strife in Lebanon two bloody massacres were committed against the Palestinians: Tall al-Za'tar camp in Beirut in 1976 conducted by Christian forces and Şabrā and Shatīlā refugee camps in South Beirut in 1982 perpetrated by Christian militia (al-Katā'ib), with Israeli complicity.<sup>59</sup> Because the Palestinians received little help from Arab countries during these massacres, the concept of collective Arab nationalism was called into question and the territorial basis of most Arab nationalism was brought to the fore. These conditions affected Lebanese and

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<sup>58</sup> For a brief summary of the causes of the 1975 civil war in Lebanon see Hourani (1991), pp. 429-32. See also Fisk (1991), pp. 73-86.

<sup>59</sup> Hourani (1991), p. 431. See also Fisk (1991), pp. 78-9.

Palestinian women as much as men. Women's activism, however, was highly influenced by this turbulent situation since the *modus vivendi* during these fights was severe. This political history brought the fate of women in these two countries closer together since their struggle for recognition of their rights was paralleled by the fight for land liberation.<sup>60</sup> This reality, once more, is clearly reflected in the fiction of this period, especially in women's writings, and those of al-Sammān and Khalīfah in particular.

Thus, Arab writers, who found in the two major conflicts; *al-nakbah*, 'the disaster' (1948) and *al-naksah*, 'the setback' (1967) a major theme for their literary production,<sup>61</sup> started to shift their subject matter from a collective Arab nationalism to more territorial kinds.<sup>62</sup> The last few decades of the twentieth century witnessed a literature which is mainly concerned with the Lebanese civil war and the Palestinian Uprising (the Intifada) with the notable participation of women writers. However, feminist issues still formed a major part of the debate. It is these national crises which marked more awareness of feminist roles in the Arab Middle East generally and the Levant in particular. Yet in this period there was a greater tendency towards discussing the feminist struggle as part of the national struggle since, at this stage, women were

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<sup>60</sup> According to Badran, Arab women from Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, and Egypt experienced similar political histories and expressed solidarity and support for each other as early as the 1920s and 1930s when the Arab Women's Committee of Palestine turned to the Egyptian Feminist Union for help in June 1936. She states: "[t]he consolidation of pan-Arab feminism occurred as countries of the Arab East were poised for independence at the end of World War II. The Eastern women's Conference for the Defence of Palestine in 1938 had provided the arena where women could unite on behalf of nation and gender." Badran (1995), p. 238. See also pp. 224-246.

<sup>61</sup> Allen, 'The Mature Arabic Novel Outside Egypt', pp. 200-1.

<sup>62</sup> For more information about the different types of "territorial nationalisms" valid in the Arab Middle East see Suleiman (2003), pp. 162-4.

equally as concerned as men with the struggle for national liberation, and the possibilities of a ceasefire.<sup>63</sup>

To sum up, this historical account of the most prominent political events of the last century in the region sheds light on the political history of the Mashriq, the rise and development of Arab nationalisms and feminism, and its impacts on literary production, especially on feminist writings. The following section presents a literary chronology of Arab women writers, and their contributions to the literary scene in the Levant, based on the preceding account of political history.

### **LITERARY OVERVIEW: THE STORY OF CONTEMPORARY ARAB WOMEN WRITERS**

Literature is considered to be the first form in which early Arab women expressed their feminist concerns.<sup>64</sup> This section will present the literary and social background to the contemporary generation of Arab women writers in the Levant to which al-Sammān and Khalīfah belong. This will be done through a chronological account of Arab women's writings and publications since the last decades of the nineteenth century to the present. As literary trends during this period have always been affected by the political situation in the area, women writers in the Mashriq can be divided into three generations according to the historical period which witnessed their participation in the literary scene and their association with women's rights.<sup>65</sup> Each

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<sup>63</sup> The writings of Arab women, especially those Cooke calls the Beirut Decentrists, about the Lebanese civil war helped to inspire other women in different Arab countries and motivate them to call for fundamental change. For more details see Cooke, 'Arab Women Writers', p. 456.

<sup>64</sup> See Golley, 'Is Feminism Relevant', p. 532.

<sup>65</sup> For the most part, I base my categorisation of women feminists in the Mashriq, within these three generations, on Badran and Cooke's historical classification of the most important *periods*, not authors,

generation represents a step in the process of the evolution of the feminist movement in the Mashriq.

Writers from the Mashriq, in particular Lebanese, Syrians, and Egyptians, have made a major contribution to the Arabic literary legacy since they have always been at the forefront of modern Arabic literature.<sup>66</sup> Until the beginning of the twentieth century, their contribution consists primarily of translations of Western literature. However, the relative freedom of speech in Egypt which was promoted by Ismā‘īl and later reinforced by Lord Cromer, encouraged Syrian and Lebanese writers and thinkers to emigrate to Egypt.<sup>67</sup> Accordingly, Egypt became the centre of intellectuals and writers in the Mashriq, hence the special importance of the Mashriq to the rise and progress of Arabic literature.

Moreover, the Arab feminist movement that blossomed in the Mashriq became centred later in the Levant.<sup>68</sup> The relative freedom of the Levant, along with its constant interaction with the West provided the feminist movement with an ongoing impetus.

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that demonstrate the rise of Arab feminism. See Badran and Cooke (1990), p. xxi. I, however, take Badran and Cooke's classification a step further by emphasising the literary activism of these women writers during the same period of time rather than categorising them either according to their age as other critics, like Zeidan, have done. The latter approach tends to confuse the order in which Arab feminism has developed, since not all of these women writers started writing at the same age. I also eschew categorising them thematically, as Badran and Cooke do, where al-Sammān's 'rejection' of traditional customs in the 1960s is examined along al-Taymūriyyah's in 1887; needless to say such categorisation fails to explain the social, religious, and political challenges these writers had to overcome during these different time periods. My categorisation of these writers according to the dates of their participation in the literary scene helps to label the literary value of their work against the backdrop of that specific time period of their writings and subsequently set the demarcations for the *vicious cycle mode* which I will discuss in the following chapter. In order to illustrate this categorisation, I provide examples of the works of women authors who have not yet been examined at length (such as Barakāt). I also provide further analysis to the contribution of some writers who made a radical change in the literary scene in order to help identifying the thematic dynamism of Arab feminism as I will explain in the Second Chapter (such as al-Taymūriyyah and Bāḥithat al-Bādiyah).

<sup>66</sup> Lourina De Voogd, 'Arabic Literature in North Africa', in *Unheard Words: Women and Literature in Africa, the Arab World, Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America*, Mineke Schipper (Ed.), Barbara Potter Fasting (trans.), (London & New York: Allison & Busby, 1984), pp. 91-101 (92).

<sup>67</sup> See Moosa (1997), pp. 17-18.

<sup>68</sup> See Badran and Cooke (1990), pp. xi-xii.

However, the turbulent political conditions had an important impact on the feminist literature of the Levant. As already stated in the previous section, the region suffered a long history of political conflict due to the different colonial powers which settled in the area during the last two centuries. Starting with the Ottoman empire, then the British and French mandates after the first World War, as well as intermittent inner conflicts (mostly religious)<sup>69</sup>, these political events developed in people of the area a specific type of solidarity which is clearly reflected in the work of most Levantine writers. Therefore, I have chosen to limit my study to women writers from the Levant. Yet occasional reference will be made to Egypt as it was the centre of the Arab literary renaissance until the mid-twentieth century.

- **FIRST GENERATION: THE PIONEERS**

In this thesis, I consider the first generation of women writers in the Mashriq to be represented by Arab women who were literarily active, in terms of writings and publications, during the last few decades of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, roughly between 1860-1920. This period witnessed the onset of feminist activism in the Mashriq by women such as the Lebanese Hind Nawfal (1860-1920), the Lebanese Alexandra Khūrī Avierino (1872-1926), the Syrian Mariyānā Marrāsh (1848-1919),<sup>70</sup> Wardah al-Yāzījī (1838-1924), Zaynab Fawwāz (1860-1914), ‘Ā’ishah al-Taymūriyyah (1840-1902), and Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif (1886-1918)—who is known as Bāḥithat al-Bādiyah. In the body of this work, four women writers will represent this first generation: two Lebanese al-Yāzījī and Fawwāz, and two Egyptian

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<sup>69</sup> I refer here to the Christian massacre in Damascus in 1860 – see Badāwī, ‘The Background’, p. 10 – and, later, to the conflict between Muslims and Christians in Lebanon.

<sup>70</sup> See Booth (2001), pp. 45-6 for more information about Nawfal and Avierino and p. 75 for more information about Marrāsh.

al-Taymūriyyah and Bāḥithat al-Bādiyah. I have chosen these four writers to represent some exemplary and early ground-breaking contributions to literary expression of that period since their extraordinary feminist achievements is still referred to in contemporary literary and feminist studies and forms an essential part of the thematic dynamism of Arab feminism, as I will illustrate in the following chapter. Therefore, I propose the term '*the pioneers*' to refer to this first generation of women writers in the Mashriq. It was in Egypt that these four *pioneers*, among many other Arab intellectuals of that time, were able to speak for themselves and to demand the rights of their people, including women's.

These four women *pioneers* had to carve independent and singular paths. During the second half of the nineteenth century, Egypt was not the ideal place for middle- and upper-class Arab women to freely express their ambitious literary objectives, though considered more sympathetic to female literary expression than most Arab countries at that time. Thus, this first generation of *pioneers* had to start their feminist activities from “within restricted circles, that is, in private homes or meetings of women’s charitable organizations, the ‘legitimate’ gathering places for women in restricted societies”<sup>71</sup> to which they belonged.<sup>72</sup> Badran and Cooke call this pioneering feminist experience, which was mainly centred in Egypt, “invisible feminism”<sup>73</sup>. Later they started expressing themselves through journalism firstly through male-founded and run

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<sup>71</sup> Cooke, ‘Arab Women Writers’, p. 444.

<sup>72</sup> Golley argues that in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Egypt, women of lower-middle and working classes—who had to offer unpaid help to their families—were less secluded than upper-class women who were privileged to have private education in foreign languages. Consequently, “women who revolted against their situation, at first verbally, were the women who were most secluded from public life and were more likely to be eloquent and equipped for such a struggle, namely upper class, educated women.” See Golley, ‘Is Feminism Relevant’, p. 531.

<sup>73</sup> Badran and Cooke (1990), p. xxi.

papers then, towards the end of the nineteenth century, through journals and magazines founded by women.<sup>74</sup>

‘Ā’ishah ‘Iṣmat al-Taymūriyyah was Egyptian by birth. She was born to a Circassian concubine mother and a Turkish aristocrat father. Her mixed background, with the support of an extraordinary father at that time, gave her all possible opportunities for a good education. Though her education was traditional and based mainly on the Qur’ān, al-Taymūriyyah mastered three languages: Arabic, Turkish, and Persian, which she used in her writings and poetic composition.<sup>75</sup> Her early literary production at the age of thirteen was mostly poetry, particularly elegies. It was probably the influence of her pre-Islamic female ancestors which led her down that route. She was one of the early poetesses to compose in the neo-classical style.<sup>76</sup>

Al-Taymūriyyah is considered to be “the earliest of these [pioneering] writers, and is regarded by some as the best. [She is claimed also to be] the first to call for gender equality.”<sup>77</sup> Her early recognition of how unprivileged Arab women of her time were—even if they, like her, belong to a wealthy aristocratic background—was reflected clearly and genuinely in her prose writings. She articulated her rejection to the isolation imposed on women by the patriarchal society in nineteenth-century Egypt by

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<sup>74</sup> See Cooke, ‘Arab Women Writers’, pp. 443-4. Zeidan states that after Amīn, the feminist movement in Egypt was supported by Aḥmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid through *al-Jarīdah*, the newspaper of People’s Party, where he promoted women’s right to education and their equality to men. According to Zeidan, al-Sayyid was not really radical in his stance towards women’s education since he encouraged their education only in subjects which were traditionally regarded as feminine such as “home economics, literature, and needlework.” See Zeidan (1995), p. 20. However, Arab women’s journalism began with Hind Nawfal’s *al-Fatāh* in 1892 in Egypt which will be discussed in Chapter Two. For more information about the rise and development of Arab women’s journalism see *ibid.*, pp. 46-9. See also Booth (2001), pp. 62-89.

<sup>75</sup> For more information about al-Taymūriyyah’s biography see ‘Abbās Khidr, *al-Wāqi‘īyah fī-al-Adab (Realism in Literature)*, (Baghdād: Wizārat al-Thaqāfah, 1967), pp. 193-9. See also Badran (1995), p. 14 and Badran and Cooke (1990), p. 125.

<sup>76</sup> Kilpatrick, ‘Women and Literature’, p. 74.

<sup>77</sup> Cooke, ‘Arab Women Writers’, p. 444.



writing “tales and poems for other secluded women”<sup>78</sup>. In her treatise *‘Mir’āt al-Ta’ammul fī ‘l-’Umūr* (‘The Mirror of Contemplation’; 1892/1902?)<sup>79</sup>, which is considered “almost feminist”<sup>80</sup> in the sense that she addresses, in a narrative style, social problems related to men and women in her society. She also draws the attention to women’s backwardness caused by their patriarchal society. She goes further to suggest the necessity of women’s participation in the work force, next to men, as means of liberating and elevating them from their backwardness.<sup>81</sup> In *‘Natā’ij al-’Aḥwāl fī ‘l-’Aqwāl wa’l-Af‘āl* (‘The Results of Circumstances in Words and Deeds’; 1888) al-Taymūriyyah addresses people who, like her, had encountered the same experience of the ‘exile of solitude’<sup>82</sup>. In its introduction she tells her own story of disappointments and grief at being secluded in the female prison of harem. However, she accepted the challenge of such a harsh reality in the hope that she might learn more than skills in embroidery.

Yet what she managed to learn, though exceptional for a woman of that time, was not particularly satisfactory for her. She blamed isolation and the veil for her inability to fulfil her ambitions. She stated: “For had I been able to pluck the blooms of educated refinement from the gardens of knowledge, then my mind would have produced the finest honey of scrutiny.”<sup>83</sup> With this, al-Taymūriyyah recognised women’s abilities and power if they had been offered proper opportunities of education

<sup>78</sup> Badran and Cooke (1990), p. xxiii.

<sup>79</sup> Badran and Cooke state that this treatise was published some time between 1892 and al-Taymūriyyah’s death in 1902. See *ibid.*, p. 125. Zeidan states that this treatise was published in 1892. See Zeidan (1995), p. 62.

<sup>80</sup> Cooke, ‘Arab Women Writers’, p. 444.

<sup>81</sup> See Khiḍr (1967), p. 199.

<sup>82</sup> ‘Ā’ishah al-Taymūriyyah, ‘Introduction to The Results of Circumstances in Words and Deeds 1887/8’ trans. Marilyn Booth, in Badran and Cooke (1990), pp. 126-8 (128).

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

and freedom of expression. She called for breaking the imprisonment of women and enlightening their minds by education<sup>84</sup>. Although Amīn's work is considered the source of an Arab feminist consciousness, al-Taymūriyyah, in her display of this kind of early feminist awareness, can be considered as the first pioneer Arab *woman* to call for feminist rights and gender equality from within the restricted circles of the harem.

Among these four pioneering women writers the Lebanese Wardah al-Yāzījī is another example of the privileged aristocratic Arab woman writer in the later half of the nineteenth century. Like al-Taymūriyyah, al-Yāzījī's highly educated family and the support and encouragement of her father, the poet and scholar Nāṣif al-Yāzījī, were very important in nurturing her talent and bringing it into actual literary production. Though al-Yāzījī was very active socially, her social life and responsibilities did not hinder her literarily. The first edition of her famous collection of poetry *Ḥadīqat al-Ward* (*The Rose Garden*) appeared in Beirut in 1867 after one year of her marriage. Evidently her marital life did not prevent her from continuing her literary and teaching activities.<sup>85</sup> With the appearance of *The Rose Garden* in print she was considered the first Arab woman to publish in the Arab world.<sup>86</sup> Further evidence of her remarkable feminist and literary activism is that she was the first Arab woman to be eulogised publicly by a group of Lebanese women.<sup>87</sup>

It is interesting that both al-Taymūriyyah and al-Yāzījī, who belong to *pioneers'* generation, mastered poetry as their main literary profession. Al-Yāzījī, like her

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<sup>84</sup> See 'Ā'ishah al-Taymūriyyah, 'Family Reform Comes Only Through the Education of Girls 1894/5' trans. Marilyn Booth, in Badran and Cooke (1990), pp. 129-133 (133).

<sup>85</sup> For more information about al-Yāzījī's biography see Badran and Cooke (1990), p. 21. See also Zeidan (1995), pp. 55-7.

<sup>86</sup> Kilpatrick, 'Women and Literature', p. 74.

<sup>87</sup> See Badran and Cooke (1990), p. xxx.

contemporary al-Taymūriyyah, started writing poetry at the age of thirteen. She was well-known for her elegies, especially that which she wrote for her brother, the scholar and writer Ibrāhīm al-Yāzījī.<sup>88</sup> This elegy has brought comparison to the famous pre-Islamic poet, al-Khansā'.<sup>89</sup> The elegies of Wardah al-Yāzījī succeeded in renewing attention to the early contribution of Arab women in the poetic domain since pre-Islamic periods. This highlights the huge gap throughout long centuries in which there was no mention of Arab women in the literary scene perhaps because of patriarchal and social prejudices against women's enlightenment and participation in social life let alone literature.

The third *pioneer* to be examined here is Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif, best known by her pen name Bāḥithat al-Bādiyah. Though she did not belong to as aristocratic a background as that of al-Taymūriyyah and al-Yāzījī, she came from an upper middle class literary family. With the encouragement of her father, a disciple of 'Abduh who studied at al-'Azhar, she had access to learning which enabled her to be the first Egyptian woman with a primary school certificate in 1893, then to obtain a teacher's diploma in 1900. She worked as a teacher and spokeswoman for women's rights.<sup>90</sup> She is one of the very few women essayists who had the chance to convey their work to the public through Aḥmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid's Egyptian liberal newspaper *al-Jarīdah*.<sup>91</sup> It was in *al-Jarīdah* where she published a series of articles in 1909, under the title of 'Nisā'iyyāt'. By this she was the first to introduce a term connoting feminism in the

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>89</sup> Cooke, 'Arab Women Writers', p. 445.

<sup>90</sup> For more information about Nāṣif's biography see Cooke, 'Arab Women Writers', p. 446 and Badran and Cooke (1990), p. 134.

<sup>91</sup> See Badāwī, 'The Background', p. 17.

Arab world.<sup>92</sup> Later, she collected her articles and speeches and published them in a book under the same title. Her *Nisā'iyyāt* was considered to be influenced by Amīn's *The Liberation of Women*.<sup>93</sup>

Bāḥithat al-Bādiyah has been judged as “one of the first Egyptian women to call for emancipation”.<sup>94</sup> She speaks in her articles and speeches of the relationships between men and women in society, advocating education and work as the principal means to enlighten women, to reduce their enslaved dependence on men in patriarchal society, and gradually to serve as a means of liberation and emancipation.<sup>95</sup> Her position as “a devout Muslim and the partially secluded second wife of a homosexual Bedouin chief”<sup>96</sup> may be seen as the pretext of her opposition to early marriage, arranged marriage, and polygamy and mirrored in her lectures where she argues for the reformation of her society with reference to the Qur'ān and the misinterpretations of Islam. She herself was forced to give up teaching after her marriage; personal experience may have driven her to write about women's rights, especially those of

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<sup>92</sup> See Badran and Cooke (1990), p. xvii. The editors state that the term “nisā'iyyāt” ‘conventionally signifies something by or about women. However, the content of [Nāṣif's *Nisā'iyyāt*] revealed its feminism”. A more deliberate study of feminist terminology in Arabic will be presented in the chapter two.

<sup>93</sup> Cooke, ‘Arab Women Writers’, p. 446. Philipp affiliates Nāṣif with Amīn and al-Sayyid in the sense that they shared the same views regarding reforming the Egyptian nation and emancipating women as part of the general social reform. Philipp states that al-Sayyid's *al-Jarīdah* was the platform of their calls for “internal reform of society rather than the necessity for the immediate political independence of Egypt.” See Philipp, ‘Feminism’, pp. 285, 287.

<sup>94</sup> Kilpatrick, ‘Women and Literature’, p. 76. See also Zeidan (1995), p. 21. It is worth mentioning that Zeidan lists Nāṣif as the only example of early Arab feminists among other pioneer male intellectuals such as Amīn and al-Sayyid. Cole asserts this point, he states that “Nāṣif's views offer a valuable female perspective on some of the issues involved, and the fact that she often agreed with upper middle class male writers like Amīn is evidence of some solidarity among intellectuals of this class across the gender line.” See Cole, ‘Feminism’, p. 402.

<sup>95</sup> See Cole, ‘Feminism’, pp. 401-402.

<sup>96</sup> Cooke, ‘Arab Women Writers’, p. 446. Cooke does not reveal her sources for the claim that Nāṣif's husband was homosexual.

Muslim women, within the institution of marriage.<sup>97</sup> Thus her calls for women's rights reflect her own misery and the unjust life she had to endure within her marriage. She expresses a clear disapproval of the spread of Western influence across Egypt as an Arab Muslim country.<sup>98</sup> She was eulogised by Hudā Sha'rāwī in her first feminist speech in 1918.<sup>99</sup>

Zaynab Fawwāz is the last woman writer among the *pioneers* to be mentioned here. Her life story is quite different from the previous three writers in that she came from a poor family in South Lebanon. She worked as a maid for an Egyptian family where her mistress took care of her education.<sup>100</sup> Her lower-class background marks her as an exception within this first generation of Arab feminist pioneers and draws attention to her genuine talent. Despite the deterrents of "[v]eiling and seclusion"<sup>101</sup> and "her lack of schooling"<sup>102</sup>, Fawwāz's imagery and literary talents helped to establish her as one of the most notable Arab women writers of her time. Fawwāz's main concerns were women's issues and rights of education and employment. Such were the main themes of her prose essays, including, most famously, *al-Rasā'il al-Zaynabiyyah* (*The Zaynab Letters*), which have been considered as forerunners to Amīn's *The Liberation of Women*.<sup>103</sup> In this book, as well as most of her other articles, Fawwāz clearly advocates women's emancipation through breaking the confined spaces of the home and taking part in the general production system of the nation. In her calls she refers to

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<sup>97</sup> See Zeidan (1995), p. 22. See also Badran and Cooke (1990), p. 134.

<sup>98</sup> See Bāḥithat al-Bādiyah, 'A Lecture in the Club of the Umma Party 1909', trans. Ali Badran and Margot Badran, in Badran and Cooke (1990), pp. 228-238.

<sup>99</sup> See Badran and Cooke (1990), p. xxx.

<sup>100</sup> For more information about Fawwāz's biography see Booth (2001), pp. 6-7. See also Cooke, 'Arab Women Writers', p. 445 and Zeidan (1995), pp. 64-7.

<sup>101</sup> Booth (2001), p. 11.

<sup>102</sup> Kilpatrick, 'Women and Literature', p. 75.

<sup>103</sup> Cooke, 'Arab Women Writers', p. 445.

the great achievements of contemporary Western women and advocates women's political rights.<sup>104</sup> Zeidan highlights that the *pioneers* tend to express such themes since they suffered from major social obstacles such as the veil, gender segregation, and were engaged in struggle against traditional patriarchal customs that did not allow women of that period to work, let alone be creatively active. Thus their literary concerns are arguably derived from and reflective of their own personal experience.<sup>105</sup>

One of Fawwāz's other important publications is *al-Durr al-Manthūr fī Tabaqāt Rabbāt al-Khudūr* (*Scattered Pearls on the Generations of the Mistresses of Seclusion*; 1894-5) in which she published the biographies of famous Arab and European women.<sup>106</sup> Booth states that with the publication of *Scattered Pearls*

Fawwāz declared generic linkage to a centuries-old Arab/Islamic tradition of biographical dictionary compilation . . . Writing within an elite, culturally specific practice of narrating completed lives, Fawwāz appropriated a long-lived, male-authored genre for an emerging discourse of gendered experience and aspiration that would lay the groundwork for Arab women's ascendant feminisms.<sup>107</sup>

Fawwāz's appropriation of the already-existing genre of the biography in order to set the foundation for Arab feminism is regarded a sign of developing solidarity and literary awareness among these *pioneers*.<sup>108</sup>

Therefore, within this first generation of the *pioneers* a tradition of women writers' empathy with one another was established. The correspondence in poetry and prose between al-Taymūriyyah and al-Yāzījī—which was published in Fawwāz's

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<sup>104</sup> For more information about Fawwāz's calls see Zaynab Fawwāz, 'Fair and Equal Treatment 1891', translated from the Arabic by Marilyn Booth. In Badran and Cooke (1990), pp. 221-226.

<sup>105</sup> See Zeidan (1995), pp. 81-4.

<sup>106</sup> Booth (2001), pp. 1-3. See also Fawwāz, 'Fair and Equal Treatment 1891', p. 220.

<sup>107</sup> Booth (2001), p. 2.

<sup>108</sup> See Zeidan (1995), p. 66.

*Scattered Pearls*<sup>109</sup>—for example, constitutes an important approach to expressing Arab women’s affiliation and support for each other during this early stage. In this field mention must be made of al-Yāzījī, who had already started this kind of communication earlier in the 1860s when she wrote an epistolary poem to Wardah al-Turk, another woman poet from Greater Syria.<sup>110</sup> Mayy Ziyādah also had some correspondence with Bāḥithat al-Bādiyah early in the twentieth century.<sup>111</sup> In her letters, Ziyādah discussed women’s status in Arabic patriarchal societies and encouraged Bāḥithat al-Bādiyah to keep calling for women’s liberation through the demand for women’s education.<sup>112</sup> Despite these attempts by other pioneering feminists, Fawwāz’s *Scattered Pearls* remains the most remarkable, for in it she assembled these works in a biographical dictionary highlighting the pioneers’ ‘gendered experience’, to use Booth’s term.

Later, another tradition of association and affiliation among women writers in the Mashriq was established when those women publicly acknowledged other Arab women writers. One such early instance was the public obituary written for al-Yāzījī by a group of Lebanese women in 1924. They also donated a portrait of al-Yāzījī to the public library in Beirut, desiring that a portrait of the feminist poet to be hung next to those of the great men of her country.<sup>113</sup> Such traditions form a critical part of feminist literary production in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Such associations between Arab women writers are considered to constitute the ‘unseen’

<sup>109</sup> See May Ziyādah, ‘Warda al-Yāzījī 1924’, trans Miriam Cooke, in Badran and Cooke (1990), pp. 240-243 (241).

<sup>110</sup> See Badran and Cooke, pp. xxix-xxx. Also see Warda al-Yāzījī, ‘Epistolary Poem to Warda al-Turk 1867’ in *ibid.*, pp. 21-2, trans. Marilyn Booth.

<sup>111</sup> See Amal Dā’ūq Sa’d, *Fann al-Murāsalah ‘inda Mayy Ziyādah (Mayy Ziyādah’s Art of Correspondence)*, (Bayrūt: Dār al-Āfāq al-Jadīdah, 1982), p. 52.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 109, 219-225.

<sup>113</sup> Badran and Cooke (1990), p. xxx.

feminist debates among women which actually preceded those of male thinkers like Qāsim Amīn's.<sup>114</sup> It might be that those women needed the support of each other since they did not have enough support from within their confined communities. Such traditions seem to stamp this first generation of feminist women writers in the Mashriq with a mutual understanding which turned in later generations to a form of literary support. Arab women writers, during the 1970s-80s, "increasingly wrote introductions to each other's writings as well as critical reviews on essays [which reveals] a growing tradition of Arab feminist literary criticism."<sup>115</sup> Thus, it is the achievement of the *pioneers* to have forged successfully forms of cultural tradition which enabled literary and intellectual dialogue and exchange to occur between women for the first time in the Mashriq and perhaps the Arab world.

Another genre to be reemphasised in the works of the *pioneers* is poetry. As already mentioned above, al-Taymūriyyah and al-Yāzījī mastered poetry for it was, and still is, "the literary activity *par excellence*"<sup>116</sup> in Arabic. The bulk of Arabic literature over the ages comprises collections of poetry (*Dawāwīn*) composed by male poets. Yet Jayyūsī states that

women poets before the mid-twentieth century did not leave a strong creative legacy behind them, and the importance to posterity of their contribution lies rather in their ideas and nonfictional prose output. It was only in the 1950s that a real foundation for a feminine tradition in Arabic poetry was established with the rise of Nazik al-Mala'ika (b. 1923), Fadwa Tūqān (b. 1917), and one or two others.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> See *ibid.*, p. xxix.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxxv.

<sup>116</sup> Kilpatrick, 'Women and Literature', p. 74.

<sup>117</sup> Jayyūsī, 'Modernist Arab Women Writers', p. 3.



Thus the first generation of women writers in the Mashriq, the *pioneers*, though master mostly poetry, is not really recognised as having an established poetic production. It is the second generation of women writers who established an acknowledged Arab feminist poetic legacy.

- **SECOND GENERATION: THE INWARD-LOOKING GENERATION**

The second generation of women writers in the Mashriq, as identified for the purposes of this research, was active in the period between the 1920s and 1960s. In this period one comes across authors<sup>118</sup> such as the Palestinian Mayy Ziyādah (1886-1941)<sup>119</sup>, the Iraqi poetess, critic, and writer Nāzik al-Malā'ikah (1923-2007), the Palestinian poet Fadwā Tūqān (1917-2003)<sup>120</sup>, the Lebanese feminist lecturer Naẓīrah Zeineddin (1908-1976)<sup>121</sup>, the Egyptian poet, essayist, and human rights activist Durriyyah Shafīq (1907-1975)<sup>122</sup>, the Lebanese novelist Laylā Ba'albakī (b. 1936), the Syrian writer Colette Khūrī (b. 1937)<sup>123</sup>, the Palestinian Samīrah 'Azzām (1927-1967), the Lebanese-Egyptian Andrée Chedid (b. 1921), the Lebanese Etel 'Adnān (b. 1925),

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<sup>118</sup> See *ibid.*, pp.1-30 and Badran and Cooke (1990), pp. xvii-xxx as the source of these authors unless otherwise mentioned.

<sup>119</sup> The date of Mayy Ziyādah's birth is stated as 1886 by Badran and Cooke (1990), p. 239, Jayyūsī, 'Modernist Arab Women Writers', p. 3, Sa'd (1982), p. 49 and Jamīl Jabr, *Mayy Ziyādah fī Ḥayātihā wa-Adabihā*, (Bayrūt: al-Maṭba'ah al-Kāthūlīkīyah, 1960), p. 9. However, Kilpatrick states that Ziyādah was born in 1895. See 'Women and Literature', p. 75. I have chosen to follow the majority who agree on the same date. Also Badran and Cooke and Jayyūsī are more recent than Kilpatrick.

<sup>120</sup> The date of Fadwā Tūqān's birth is stated as 1917 by Badran and Cooke (1990), p. 26 and Jayyūsī, 'Modernist Arab Women Writers', p. 23. However, Kilpatrick states that Tūqān was born in 1919. See 'Women and Literature', p. 77. I have chosen to follow Badran and Cooke and Jayyūsī as both agree on the same date and they are more recent than Kilpatrick.

<sup>121</sup> The date of Naẓīrah Zeineddin's birth is stated as 1905 by Badran and Cooke (1990), p. 270. Yet Jayyūsī and Zeidan state that Zeineddin was born in 1908. See Jayyūsī, 'Modernist Arab Women Writers', p. 10 and Zeidan (1995), p. 26. I have chosen to follow Jayyūsī and Zeidan as they are more recent than Badran and Cooke.

<sup>122</sup> The date of Durriyyah Shafīq's birth is stated as 1908 by Badran and Cooke (1990), p. 352. Yet Jayyūsī states that Shafīq was born in 1907. See 'Modernist Arab Women Writers', p. 15. I have chosen to follow Jayyūsī as she is more recent than Badran and Cooke.

<sup>123</sup> The date of Colette Khūrī's birth is stated as 1937 by Allen, 'The Mature Arabic Novel', p. 211. Yet Kilpatrick states that Khūrī was born in 1935. See Kilpatrick, 'Women and Literature', p. 83. I have chosen to follow Allen as he is more recent than Kilpatrick.

the Palestinian Salmā Khaḍrā Jayyūsī (b. 1928),<sup>124</sup> in addition to others such as Hudā Sha‘rāwī, Nabawiyyah Mūsā, Ulfā al-Idelbī, Amīnah al-Sa‘īd, and Latīfah Zayyāt.<sup>125</sup>

These women gained a louder voice than their predecessors, primarily because this period witnessed the rise of women’s public organised movements in different Arab regions, especially the Levant.<sup>126</sup> It is during the time of the second generation that feminist consciousness in the Mashriq began to flourish through debate about gender issues and the struggle for social transformation. This “first public identification of Arab women as feminists coincided with the founding of the Egyptian Feminist Union in 1923.”<sup>127</sup> Accordingly, feminist activism was still centred in Egypt during the first half of the twentieth century. I have chosen three women writers to represent the second generation: Mayy Ziyādah, Nāzik al-Malā’ikah, and Laylā Ba‘albakī. They are notable for their outstanding contribution to the literary scene of that time through their publications which presented an early, yet audacious, feminist awareness. Besides, the focus of their writings forms a major step in the development of feminism in the Mashriq and plays a not insignificant role in its thematic dynamism as I will illustrate in Chapter Two. I propose the term ‘*inward-looking*’ to refer to this generation of women writers in the Mashriq for, despite the importance of their literary attainments, most of their feminist output (with the exception of al-Malā’ikah) is self-centered, focusing almost exclusively on women’s issues and taking little notice of other social, political, and national causes, as I will illustrate later.

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<sup>124</sup> For Chedid, ‘Adnān and Jayyūsī see Kilpatrick, ‘Women and Literature’, p. 78.

<sup>125</sup> See Badran and Cooke (1990), pp. xxxii-xxxiii. For more information on Sha‘rāwī and al-Sa‘īd see Fernea and Bezirgan (1988), pp. 193-200 & 373-90.

<sup>126</sup> Badran and Cooke (1990), p. xxi.

<sup>127</sup> Lisa Suhair Majaj, Paula W. Sunderman and Therese Saliba, ‘Introduction’, in *Intersections: Gender, Nation, and Community in Arab Women’s Novels*, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2002), pp. xvii –xxx (xx).

Mayy Ziyādah was born in Nazareth, Palestine, to a Lebanese father and a Palestinian mother.<sup>128</sup> She was brought up between Palestine, Lebanon, and Egypt. In the latter country, she ran a well-attended literary salon and earned the title ‘Princess of Poetry’,<sup>129</sup> since she was considered “the first woman to be accepted into the mainstream of early-twentieth-century Arabic literature”.<sup>130</sup> Ziyādah was a prolific writer and lecturer. Her output covered many generic forms such as articles, short stories, literary studies, translations of French, English, and German works,<sup>131</sup> and above all poetry. In her writings, Ziyādah used the ‘poetry-in-prose’ form.<sup>132</sup> Moreover, she “was the first Arab woman to write full-length biographies in Arabic of other Arab women”,<sup>133</sup> especially from the first generation, such as al-Yāzījī, al-Taymūriyyah, and Bāḥithat al-Bādiyah. By emphasising their important role in the call for women’s freedom and equality “she was already helping to create a female canon, a tradition on which others would build.”<sup>134</sup>

Ziyādah also helped to entrench the tradition of eulogising Arab women as a means of support and defence.<sup>135</sup> In her famous eulogy of Wardah al-Yāzījī she plants the first seeds of feminist nationalist calls when she connects women’s freedom to “the

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<sup>128</sup> For more information about Ziyādah’s biography see Jabr (1960), pp. 9-32 and Sa’d (1982), pp. 49-74. It is worth mentioning that Badran and Cooke state that Ziyādah’s father was Palestinian and her mother was Lebanese. See Badran and Cooke (1990), p. 239. I have chosen to follow Jabr and Sa’d as they both agree regarding this information.

<sup>129</sup> Kilpatrick, ‘Women and Literature’, p. 75. Jayyūsī considers Ziyādah’s literary salon as a reminder of the literary salon of Sukaīnah bint al-Ḥusāīn, a great granddaughter of the Prophet, referring by this to the freedom was given to women early in Islam. See Jayyūsī, ‘Modernist Arab Women Writers’, p. 6. For more information about Ziyādah’s salon and its popularity see Zeidan (1995), pp. 53-5.

<sup>130</sup> Cooke, ‘Arab Women Writers’, p. 447.

<sup>131</sup> See Sa’d (1982), pp. 49-74.

<sup>132</sup> Kilpatrick, ‘Women and Literature’, p. 75.

<sup>133</sup> Booth (2001), p. xvi.

<sup>134</sup> Cooke, ‘Arab Women Writers’, p. 447.

<sup>135</sup> See Ziyādah, ‘Warda al-Yāzījī 1924’, p. 239.

good of the nations”<sup>136</sup>. Ziyādah was an activist feminist.<sup>137</sup> She was a member of the Intellectual Association of Egyptian Women founded in 1914 by Hudā Sha‘rāwī.<sup>138</sup> However, Ziyādah suffered a tragic end. In 1935, she was incarcerated in a mental institution by her cousin who accused her of insanity in order to get hold of her inheritance. Jayyūsī considers Ziyādah a “victim to a male assault on her integrity” and her tragic story as a “reminder of the difficulties women constantly faced (and still face) in a male-dominated world.”<sup>139</sup>

Nāzik al-Malā’ikah is the second example of Arab women writers labelled here under the second generation. She is an Iraqi poetess, critic, and writer who was born to a family of poets. I have chosen to extensively examine al-Malā’ikah as exemplary of the second generation of Arab women writers for she was considered to be one of the first Arab poets to implement free verse introducing to her generation of Arab writers a new genre which was largely adopted later.<sup>140</sup> For this achievement, she is considered one of the pioneers of Arab modernism.<sup>141</sup> Al-Malā’ikah, however, was attacked for her audacity to approach, as a woman, and even more to introduce changes, to the male-

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., p. 243.

<sup>137</sup> Sa’d (1982), pp. 50, 52. See also Zeidan (1995), pp. 75-6.

<sup>138</sup> See Badran and Cooke (1990), p. xxx. Labībah Hāshim, the founder of the women’s paper *Fatat al-Sharq* (1906), was the Arabic secretary of this association.

<sup>139</sup> Jayyūsī, ‘Modernist Arab Women Writers’, p. 6. Here we have to be aware of Jayyūsī’s over-generalising feminist statement when she conjectures that the patriarchal system represented by Ziyādah’s male cousin is behind the death of Ziyādah. However, Jayyūsī does not provide enough reference to her statement. On the same topic, Sa’d joins Jayyūsī in her consideration about Ziyādah’s miserable end and provides some of Ziyādah’s letters to some friends of hers such as Amīn al-Rīḥānī, Astīr Wākīm, and an anonymous friend. See Sa’d (1982), pp. 68, 281-5. Yet it is interesting that Jamīl Jabr disagrees with both female critics and accuses Ziyādah of madness. He refers to her lonely life while she was a teenager as one of the indicators of her strange behaviour which culminated after the death of her parents and Jibrān Khalīl Jibrān. He even goes on claiming that it was only until her menopause that her madness appeared clearly. See Jabr (1960), pp. 9-32.

<sup>140</sup> For more information about free verse and al-Malā’ikah’s contribution to the poetic domain see Fernea and Bezirgan (1988), pp. 232-43. See also Cooke, ‘Arab Women Writers’, p. 449. See also Jayyūsī (1992), p. 17.

<sup>141</sup> See Dizīreh Ṣaqqāl, *Ḥarakat al-Ḥadāthah: Ṭurūḥahā wa Injāzātaha (Modernism: Its Objectives and Achievements)*, (Bayrūt: Manshūrāt Mīryam, 1991), p. 42.

dominated “holy edifice of Arabic poetry”,<sup>142</sup> the fact which makes her attainment laudable of further deliberation in this dissertation.

Another example of al-Malā’ikah’s challenge to the male-established literary standards is her denunciation of the sexist nature of Arabic language whose vocabulary and grammar denigrate women.<sup>143</sup> Al-Malā’ikah’s mother, Sulaymah Al-Malā’ikah known as Umm Nizār (1908-1953), was herself an important poet, well-known for her Arab nationalist affiliations and feminist concerns which were clearly tackled in her poetry.<sup>144</sup> Umm Nizār was considered to be “the first Iraqi poetess to call for an improvement in the position of women.”<sup>145</sup> However, and apart from continuing her mother’s legacy, al-Malā’ikah’s writings were affected by the “political and social injustice” around her and “the humiliations which she as a woman has experienced.”<sup>146</sup>

Her sensitivity towards human injustice was expressed in the theme of death which was central in her early poetry where she declared a detestation of life because of human suffering and injustice.<sup>147</sup> In that sense, she observed cautiously “the intolerable

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<sup>142</sup> Jayyūsī, ‘Modernist Arab Women Writers’, p. 22.

<sup>143</sup> See Zeidan (1995), p. 43. On this point, Zeidan refers to Ziyādah’s attack on Arabic grammar’s discrimination in agreement between nouns and adjectives and to the Arab feminist conference in 1944 when Hudā Sha’rāwī suggested the elimination of Nūn al-Niswah: the subject marker of plural feminine on verbs. See *ibid.*, note 5, pp. 281-2.

<sup>144</sup> For more information about Umm Nizār, see Yasir Suleiman, ‘Nationalist Concerns in the Poetry of Nazik al-Mala’ika’, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 1/2 (1995), pp. 93-114 (95). See also Zeidan (1995), p. 58.

<sup>145</sup> Kilpatrick, ‘Women and Literature’, p. 77.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>147</sup> For more information about the theme of death and detestation of life in al-Malā’ikah’s early poetry, see Ronak Hussein and Yasir Suleiman, ‘Death in the Early Poetry of Nazik al-Mala’ika’, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (1993), pp. 214-225. It is worth mentioning that the theme of death in the form of elegies is predominant in the poetry of Arab women especially the pre-Islamic al-Khansā’. Critics argue that Arab female poets take the task of commemorating male relatives within their marginalised gender roles. These poetesses partake in the literary tradition through immortalising their beloved dead brothers and fathers. Such a task is accepted by their patriarchal communities as it keeps these women in the shadow of men. See Malti-Douglas (1991), pp. 169-170 and Miriam Cooke, *Women and the War Story*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p.

conditions of women in her society and, worse still, their preoccupation with what she regards as the trivia of human existence.”<sup>148</sup> In her later works, after 1968, there is an inclination towards the endorsement of Arab nationalism. Al-Malā’ikah’s nationalism revolved around the call for Arab unity and the liberation of Palestine. Her nationalist calls were infused with a spiritual dimension derived from her religious belief which is obvious in her use of Qur’ānic references.<sup>149</sup> Like Ziyādah, who advocated the parity of feminist and nationalist concerns, al-Malā’ikah’s nationalist calls were feminist in import. She harshly criticised Arab women “for their excessive concern with the trivialities of life, instead of the urgent nationalist challenges facing the Arab nation”.<sup>150</sup> Accordingly, she endeavoured to expose women’s unequal status in Arab societies by criticising their traditional social norms and their ramifications for the national cause.

Nāzik al-Malā’ikah, though not recruited into any feminist movement, is considered one of the early feminist spokeswomen. She gave a series of lectures in which she addressed women’s status in society and launched a strong appeal for women’s rights. In 1953, she gave her first lecture at the Women’s Union in Baghdad. It was entitled “The [Arab] Woman between Passivity and Strength of Character”. In this lecture, al-Malā’ikah highlighted the passivity of Arab women and the ill-treatment they endure by men. She discussed the backward culture which entitles unlimited freedom to men while depriving women of basic kinds of freedom: condemning them to very

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168. However, the human aspect of al-Malā’ikah’s poetry initiates a new dimension within the theme of death of her predecessors.

<sup>148</sup> Hussein and Suleiman, ‘Death’, p. 218.

<sup>149</sup> For more information about Malā’ikah’s nationalist concerns, see Suleiman, ‘Nationalist Concerns’, pp. 93-114 where he offers a study of her later works since 1968.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

limited geographical, political, and symbolic spaces, and forcing them to become passive and ignorant.

She maintained the same argument in her second lecture entitled “Fragmentation in Arab Society” in 1954 and the third one entitled “Social Flaws in the Life of the Arab Woman”.<sup>151</sup> She called for women’s rights of equality and recognition using a “feminine but totally robust tone” which distinguished her from other women poets of her time such as Fadwā Tūqān, who “was then writing her songs of love and spleen, mostly in a style very much in line with what was expected of a woman poet at the time and therefore acceptable to men.”<sup>152</sup> According to Jayyūsī, al-Malā’ikah’s “daring leadership in the field of poetic technique, her seriousness and genuine self-confidence, made her quite different from other women writers who felt dependent on men’s opinion.”<sup>153</sup> Through her poetry and writings, al-Malā’ikah was one of the first to criticise Arabic culture and “the ills of contemporary Arab society in general”<sup>154</sup> early in the 1950s laying by this “a foundation of independence and integrity for other women to follow”<sup>155</sup>. However, her daring, revolutionary approach condemned her to severe attacks which affected her literary status and led her withdraw from the literary scene in the late 1960s.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> For more information about these three lectures see Jayyūsī, ‘Modernist Arab Women Writers’, pp. 24-8.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., p. 23. Prior to this argument, Jayyūsī noted that it “was only after [Tūqān] had won her war against her diminished status as a woman that she was able to participate freely in the nation’s political struggle against the external enemy.” See Jayyūsī (1992), pp. 10-11.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., p. 29. It is worth mentioning here that Nawāl al-Sa’dāwī in her criticism of Arab societies adopts the same attitude of al-Malā’ikah by highlighting women’s passivity as a result of the unequal treatment of men and women. Thus al-Malā’ikah launched a feminist debate which was adopted by the following generation.

<sup>156</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 28-9.

While writing poetry was one of the main traditional outputs of *the pioneers*, during the first half of the twentieth century Arab women writers also embarked upon exploring new literary genres such as the novel and the short story which are considered to be imported from the West. Within these new genres, Arab women writers ushered in a new approach to feminist issues during this transitional period.<sup>157</sup> Laylā Ba‘albakī is one of the first Arab women writers to adopt these new literary styles. She was born in 1936 in southern Lebanon to a traditional Shi‘ite family. She endured a hard struggle with her family to be able to continue her education.<sup>158</sup> Ba‘albakī’s first writings were articles and short stories which she published, at the age of fourteen, in periodicals, using a pseudonym.<sup>159</sup> Her education at the Jesuit University in Beirut, followed by a one-year scholarship in Paris, provided her with the appropriate material to embark on the so-called Western genres of her time by writing novels and short stories. Ba‘albakī, with her first novel *Anā Aḥyā* (*I Live*; 1958), launched the revolutionary aspect of feminist Arabic novel.<sup>160</sup> It is her “courage and modernist outlook”,<sup>161</sup> as Jayyūsī puts it, which marked the most important feminist contribution to the male dominated field of modern Arabic fiction in the first half of the twentieth century.

Ba‘albakī wrote *I Live* at the age of eighteen.<sup>162</sup> The novel is “described as an autobiographical narration of a middle class woman’s revolt against social conventions.”<sup>163</sup> The rebellious attitude of Ba‘albakī’s female protagonist in *I Live* and

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<sup>157</sup> See Badran and Cooke (1990), p. xxxiii.

<sup>158</sup> For more information about Ba‘albakī’s biography see Zeidan (1982), p. 273.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., p. 273.

<sup>160</sup> See Jayyūsī, ‘Modernist Arab Women Writers’, p. 4.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>162</sup> Zeidan (1982), p. 282.

<sup>163</sup> Badran and Cooke (1990), p. xxxiii-xxxiv.



her desire to break the grip of her conservative family and society<sup>164</sup> in order to reach self-fulfilment, was considered shocking at that time. Ba'albakī resumes the same calls in her later writings like her second novel *al-Āliha al-Mamsūkhah* (*The Deformed Gods*; 1960)<sup>165</sup>, her 1964 collection of short stories *Safīnat Ḥanān ilā al-Qamar* (*Spaceship of Tenderness to the Moon*) and her lecture “Naḥnu bilā Aqni‘ah” (“We [*sic*] without Masks”) in 1959.<sup>166</sup> Yet the audacity of Ba'albakī and her daring treatment of critical issues like Arab women's chastity<sup>167</sup>, sexuality<sup>168</sup>, alienation,<sup>169</sup> and self-fulfilment through asserting gender identity distinguish her from her antecedents and mark a new subject area within Arab feminist writings, which concurrently asserts the inward-looking feature of the writings of this second generation.

This *inward-looking* generation contains a large number of Arab women writers. Some of them like al-Malā'ikah and Ba'albakī “have played an important role in changing the supposedly static conditions of the society into which they were born. They have been more active publicly than their ancestors in mediating conflicts of values within their own communities.”<sup>170</sup> Even with such audacious attempts to change the status quo, until the mid-twentieth century Arab “women's literary and intellectual endeavors had been overlooked, often dismissed, and sometimes committed to

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<sup>164</sup> Zeidan (1982), p. 274.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., p. 283.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., p. 288.

<sup>167</sup> Issues regarding the female body and chastity before marriage are at the centre of Ba'albakī's writings especially *The Deformed Gods*. See Zeidan (1982), p. 283; see also Accad (1978), p. 95. One might conjecture that Ba'albakī's radicalism arises from her audacity to address such themes which as early as the 1960s were hardly mentioned within feminist discourse. Therefore, she is believed to have taken the first step in the sexual revolution of women in the Mashriq.

<sup>168</sup> Ba'albakī's shocking use of some sexual expressions in *Spaceship of Tenderness to the Moon* “led to her trial on charges of obscenity and harming the public morality” in 1964. For an account of this trial see Fernea and Bezirgan (1988), pp. 280-90. For a brief analysis of this short story see Accad (1978), pp. 102-4.

<sup>169</sup> Alienation is the central theme of Ba'albakī's “We [*sic*] without Masks”. See Zeidan (1982), p. 288.

<sup>170</sup> Fernea and Bezirgan (1988), p. xxxiii.

oblivion”<sup>171</sup>. It was not until the third generation that Arab feminists managed fully to challenge the hegemony of the male dominated field and their feminist writing managed to acquire greater recognition.<sup>172</sup>

Nevertheless, one can still trace the earliest literary feminist-nationalist movement within the works of this *inward-looking* generation. Durriyyah Shafiq is considered by Jayyūsī as one of the most interesting Arab feminists in the mid-twentieth century.<sup>173</sup> She expresses an early awareness of the need to pursue concurrent feminist and nationalist struggles.<sup>174</sup> Though her early nationalist concerns were initially territorial, and related to Egyptian women, she developed a collective sense of nationalism later, from the very beginning of the 1948 war. Shafiq was convinced that “the weakness in the front presented by Arabs to the world was: ‘The Woman! A nation cannot be liberated whether internally or externally while its women are enchained’.”<sup>175</sup> With this Shafiq launched the first public link between women’s liberation and land liberation, strengthened by a sense of purpose in collective Arab nationalism.

Shafiq was not alone in her early nationalist consciousness. In her study of women’s literature in the Arab East, Kilpatrick considers the Syrian Ulfā al-Idelbī and the Palestinian Samīrah ‘Azzām to be the first women to adopt the short story in which

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<sup>171</sup> Jayyūsī, ‘Modernist Arab Women Writers’, p. 5.

<sup>172</sup> In this study I consider the onset of feminist literature to take place in the Mashriq. However, it is worth noting that while towards the mid-twentieth century women writers in the Mashriq ushered in a sexual revolution in literature, women in other Arab countries like Algeria, during almost the same period of time, were fighting for yet more basic rights such as prearranged marriages. Such facts highlight the precedence of the Levantine feminists to their contemporaries in other Arab countries. See Allen, ‘The Mature Arabic Novel’, p. 211.

<sup>173</sup> Jayyūsī, ‘Modernist Arab Women Writers’, p. 15. It is worth noting that Shafiq was an activist feminist who developed political nationalist concerns.

<sup>174</sup> See Duriya Shafiq, ‘Islam and the Constitutional Rights of Woman 1952’, translated from the Arabic by Ali Badran and Margot Badran, in Badran and Cooke (1990), pp. 352-6 (352).

<sup>175</sup> Jayyūsī, ‘Modernist Arab Women Writers’, pp. 17-18.

they ushered in new subject-matters. In her short stories, al-Idlibī launched new approaches by paying “particular attention to the fragility and suffering inherent in human relationships.”<sup>176</sup> Later, in 1980, al-Idlibī published a novel, *Damascus, Smile of Sorrow* in which “she combine[d] the themes of the attempt of Syrian women shortly after the First World War to emancipate themselves and the struggle for independence which reached its climax in the same period.”<sup>177</sup> Therefore, al-Idlibī explores nascent feminist-nationalist concerns in women’s literature though her nationalist affiliations remain territorial.<sup>178</sup>

Likewise, the Palestinian Samīrah ‘Azzām reflects the suffering of her people using new literary techniques such as stream of consciousness. ‘Azzām’s contribution to the literary scene is important in the sense that she neglects the traditional romantic concerns of earlier writers and moves towards deeper examination of the suffering of her people, including women, after the creation of Israel.<sup>179</sup> Thus ‘Azzām contributes to the creation of an early literary connection between nationalism and feminism in the literature of Arab women writers. Though these three women writers initiated the first literary, feminist-nationalist project, their efforts were not noticeably recognised for they were mostly engrossed in women’s issues, as will be further illustrated in Chapter Two. Therefore, the next generation has to revive and broaden the scope of these initial calls for the liberation of both women and the nation.

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<sup>176</sup> Kilpatrick, ‘Women and Literature’, p. 80. Here Mention must be made of the fact that the early human concerns expressed by al-Idlibī’s were adopted and developed later on in the writings of another Syrian writer; al-Sammān.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>178</sup> For more information on al-Idlibī’s writing on war, especially *Damascus, Smile of Sorrow*, see Shaaban (1999), pp. 141-44.

<sup>179</sup> Kilpatrick, ‘Women and Literature’, pp. 80-1. Once more, it is worth noting that the technique of stream of consciousness is prevalent in al-Sammān’s works.

- **THIRD GENERATION: THE AVANT-GARDES**

In the context of this thesis the third generation is intended to cover the period from the 1960s until the present. In this period there are many authors, such as the Egyptian feminist, doctor, and writer Nawāl El-Sa‘dāwī (b. 1930)<sup>180</sup>, the Lebanese Emily Naṣrallāh (b. 1938)<sup>181</sup>, the Egyptian writer Ahdāf Soueif (b. 1950)<sup>182</sup>, the Palestinian author Liyānah Badr (1950), the Lebanese novelist and short story writer Ḥanān al-Shāykh (b. 1945),<sup>183</sup> Laylā ‘Usayrān (b. 1936), the Lebanese Hudā Barakāt (b. 1952), and most importantly for this research Ghādah al-Sammān and Saḥar Khalīfah.<sup>184</sup> I have chosen Ḥanān al-Shaykh and Hudā Barakāt to represent this generation for their writings are considered leading in the revival of the Arabic novel in Lebanon in the aftermath of the 1975 civil war.<sup>185</sup> In recent work, both writers have explored feminist and nationalist issues—to which both al-Sammān and Khalīfah remain devoted—while using innovative literary techniques. Therefore, their writings are pivotal to feminism in the Mashriq for it contribute to both its thematic dynamism and literary novelty. I propose the term ‘*avant-gardes*’ to refer to this generation as I will extensively explain in the following discussion.

Ḥanān al-Shaykh’s family comes originally from southern Lebanon. She was born and raised in Beirut where she received her high school education before

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<sup>180</sup> Cooke, ‘Arab Women Writers’, p. 453.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., p. 451.

<sup>182</sup> For Soueif’s biography see <http://www.africacentre.org.uk/habari2.htm>.

<sup>183</sup> Kilpatrick, ‘Women and Literature’, p. 86.

<sup>184</sup> Since al-Sammān and Khalīfah are the main focus of this thesis, little attention will be paid to their biography and works at this stage as this will be explored more deliberately in the following chapters. However, the presentation of this chapter aims to illustrate the social and literary background to al-Sammān’s and Khalīfah’s works.

<sup>185</sup> See Yumna al-‘Id, ‘Lebanon’, in *Arab Women Writers: A Critical Reference Guide 1873-1999*, Radwa Ashour, Ferial J. Ghazoul and Hasna Reda-Mekdashi (Eds.), (Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2008), pp. 13-59 (30).

proceeding to Cairo for her higher education. Al-Shaykh entered the literary scene at the age of sixteen with her publication of essays on subjects such as freedom and infidelity. At the age of nineteen she wrote her first novel *Intiḥār Rajul Mayyit* (*Suicide of a Dead Man*) which was published in Beirut in 1970.<sup>186</sup> Since then, al-Shaykh's literary production has been steady. Her most recent novels include *Ḥikāyat Zahrah* (*The Story of Zahra*; 1980), *Misk al-Ghazāl* (*Women of Sand and Myrrh*; 1988), and *Barīd Bayrūt* (*Beirut Blues*; 1996).<sup>187</sup> In these three novels al-Shaykh proposes a unique representation of feminist issues against the background of the unravelled Lebanese society during and in the aftermath of the 1975 Lebanese civil war.

Al-Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra* evokes controversial arguments in the literary domain. Allen considers this novel "one of the most notable recent additions to modern Arabic fiction, both for the effective way in which a number of issues are presented to the reader and for the brilliant use of technique and style."<sup>188</sup> Through the story of Zahrah, the Shi'ite girl from Southern Lebanon, al-Shaykh interweaves the position of women in such restricted society with the societal causes which "have contributed to the making and continuation of the civil conflict."<sup>189</sup> In this context, al-Shaykh presents the interrelation between feminist and nationalist struggles in Lebanon. Sabāḥ Ghandour illustrates this interrelation, and in so doing exemplifies the critical reading of this novel. She states: "Zahra, who has been reduced to a speechless woman, to a body,

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<sup>186</sup> Sabāḥ Ghandour, 'Hanan al-Shaykh's *Hikayat Zahra*: A Counter-Narrative and a Counter-History', in *Intersections: Gender, Nation, and Community in Arab Women's Novels*, Lisa Suhair Majaj, Paula W Sunderman and Therese Saliba (Eds.), (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2002), pp. 231-49 (231-2).

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., p. 232.

<sup>188</sup> Allen, 'The Mature Arabic Novel', p. 204.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., p. 204. See also Shaaban (1999), pp. 168-71.

represents in fact the speechless Lebanon, the land that cannot voice its own sufferings.”<sup>190</sup> A further analysis of the novel could link the oppressive silencing of Arab women by their patriarchal societies, represented here by Zahrah, with the general oppressive forces of Arab countries, fostered by colonial powers. In both cases the victimised and silenced figure faces a fatal end. However, in *Women of Sand and Myrrh* and *Beirut Blues*, al-Shaykh pays more attention to the impacts of the civil war on women’s position and the spatial and emotional transition, whether positive or negative, women gain as a result of the disintegration of social and patriarchal hierarchies.

Allen endows al-Sammān’s *Beirut Nightmares* and al-Shaykh’s *The Story of Zahra* with the same importance since both tackle the theme of the Lebanese civil strife in roughly the same period. Both writers are Arab feminists who in their reflection of the civil strife go beyond common expectations to explore emotional and sensual aspects of women’s lives.<sup>191</sup> With this desire to transcend the traditional themes of women’s relationships with men and their views of patriarchy, these writers are considered by Allen to

have addressed themselves to the fate of their country, pointing out with a fresh sense of élan and freedom, spawned in part perhaps by the very anarchy within which they created their works, the brutality and essential futility of the destructive urge which they witness all around them.<sup>192</sup>

Thus the nature of the Lebanese civil war provides these writers with a contemporary nationalistic and political urgency to intensify and further draw out pre-existing feminist

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<sup>190</sup> Ghandour, ‘Hanan al-Shaykh’s *Hikayat Zahra*’, p. 248. For similar reviews, see the back cover of the second edition of *Hikāyat Zahrah*, 1989.

<sup>191</sup> See Allen, ‘The Mature Arabic Novel’, p. 211.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211.

concerns. The same experience and witnessing of anarchy and brutality stimulate similar explorations by Hudā Barakāt.

Barakāt is a journalist and novelist. She was born in Lebanon in 1952 and raised in Beirut where she graduated in 1974 from the Lebanese University with a degree in French Literature. Barakāt's national Lebanese affiliation climaxed when she abandoned her studies towards a PhD degree in Paris to go back to Lebanon after the outbreak of the 1975 civil war. This Lebanese affiliation is clearly articulated in her feminist writings. Her first novel *Ḥajar al-Ḍaḥīk* (*The Stone of Laughter*; 1990), received *al-Naqid* award for first novels and is considered one of the best novels written about the Lebanese civil war.<sup>193</sup> Barakāt expresses a deep commitment to the theme of the Lebanese civil war. Her later novels explore more expansively the same subject of human suffering in a period of political conflict. Barakāt's literary production includes *Ah-lil-Hawā* (*People of Love*; 1993), *Ḥarith al-Miyāh* (*The Tiller of Waters*; 1998) which received the prestigious Najīb Maḥfouz Medal for Arabic literature in 2000, and most recently *Sayidī wa Ḥabībī* (*My Master, My Lover*; 2004).<sup>194</sup>

The experience of survival during the civil war helps Barakāt to crystallise her thoughts and express herself as a feminist and nationalist writer. Writing becomes her way to survive the brutality of the war. She explains that she writes “in wars and civil

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<sup>193</sup> Mona Fayad, 'Strategic Androgyny: Passing as Masculine in Barakat's *Stone of Laughter*', in *Intersections: Gender, Nation, and Community in Arab Women's Novels*, Lisa Suhair Majaj, Paula W Sunderman and Therese Saliba (Eds.), (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2002), pp. 162-79 (162-3). For a brief summary and analysis of *The Stone of Laughter* see Shaaban (1999), pp. 172-78.

<sup>194</sup> Translation of the title of this last novel is mine. However I adopted the Fayad's translation of Barakāt's other novels. See Fayad, 'Strategic Androgyny', pp. 162-3.

wars because [she has] no power, no strength, no weapons and no soldiers.”<sup>195</sup> Her only weapon of resistance is to write using a genderless voice: “when I write I step outside my gender, outside any gender. . . . When we write we are both male and female and yet at the same time well beyond either.”<sup>196</sup> Authorially transcending gender in this way, Barakāt is enabled to express feminist issues differently. The portrayal of gay male characters is reflective of the broader feminist and humanist principles which animate her work, enabling her to shed light on the struggle of other ethnic and sexual minorities against the backdrop of the Lebanese civil war. This unusual and sympathetic response to a sexual minority is clear in Barakāt’s *The Stone of Laughter* and *The Tiller of Waters* where she explores the construction of gay identity in Lebanon before and during the civil war. She further reinforces this theme with the skilful interweaving of feminist calls ‘in disguise’—as can be identified in the context of this thesis—and the life of ethnic minorities in Lebanon such as Druze. Therefore, Barakāt masterfully explores through her gay male protagonists the repression of both women and of other sexual and ethnic groups in Lebanon. Hence, she goes beyond the usual feminist concerns to include demands for the recognition and freedom of other suppressed groups within her society.

Barakāt’s literary works reveal a Lebanese territorial nationalist affiliation.<sup>197</sup>

This territorial element exists in the works of a number of Arab writers, especially those

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<sup>195</sup> Hoda Barakat, ‘I Write against my Hand’, in Fadia Faqir (Ed.), *In the House of Silence: Autobiographical Essays by Arab Women Writers*, translated by Shirley Eber and Fadia Faqir, (Reading: Garnet Publishing Ltd, 1998), pp. 41-7 (46).

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>197</sup> In the body of this text, by using the term ‘Lebanese territorial nationalism’ I do not refer to Antun Sa’ada’s version of territorial nationalism which according to Suleiman is ‘regional in character’. Yet I employ some use of the ‘state-orientated’ type of Lebanese nationalism; see Suleiman (2003), pp. 204-19.



from the previous generations such as al-Idelbī and ‘Azzām who express intense interest in Syrian and Palestinian national concerns successively. However, this is not the only trend perceivable in the works of the *avant-gardes*. The seeds of anti-territorial Arab nationalism are also clearly apparent. The Lebanese Laylā ‘Usayrān, for example, expresses a great commitment to the Palestinian cause. Cooke states that ‘Usayrān “wrote for the Palestinian paper, *Fatah*, and signed articles with her own name to show the world, as she says, that a non-Palestinian could feel and express this cause as an Arab cause.”<sup>198</sup> This attitude to cross the territorial boundaries between Arab countries is a good example of the development of nationalist consciousness in the Levant which starts taking place with the loss of Palestine. This consciousness is justified by Buṭrus al-Bustānī’s belief that “the environment in which a people lives helps to mould their character and make out of them a broadly cohesive unit with common interests.”<sup>199</sup> This is valid in the Levant and strengthened by the shared language and traditions. Thus this third generational period, the *avant-gardes*’ period, witnesses this type of Levantine collective nationalism which is explicitly expressed in the works of women from this generation. This idea will be explored broadly in the analysis of the literary works of al-Sammān and Khalīfah in the following chapters.

This historical and conceptual trajectory of women writers in the Mashriq serves to emphasise Jayyūsī’s statement that this “present generation of Arab women writers of fiction . . . is not rootless, nor do these writers lack a strong feminist background of writings in modern times to pave the way to a new consciousness of their possibilities

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<sup>198</sup> Cooke (1988), p. 8.

<sup>199</sup> Quoted in Suleiman (2003), p. 164.

and strength.”<sup>200</sup> In spite of this fact, the political and literary activism of Arab feminists only came to light later in the twentieth century when political and subsequent social changes offered women more freedom and opportunities to articulate their objectives through writing. Therefore, it is the third generation of women writers in the Mashriq, the *avant-gardes*, that solidified the legacy of Arab feminism.

While the *inward-looking* generation was motivated and sustained by the rise of women’s public organised movements, the *avant-gardes* were “fuelled to some extent by the United Nations Decade of Women (1975-1985) [and the] outside stimulus [which] encouraged Arab states to support limited public debate on the woman question.”<sup>201</sup> However there are other factors which played an essential role in forming a political legacy through the activity of the *avant-gardes*.

The importance of the *avant-gardes* lies in their contribution to the literary scene within what was a critical period in Arab history. It was this generation of writers that witnessed the outcomes of *al-nakbah*, ‘the disaster’ of 1948 and *al-naksah*, ‘the setback’ of 1967, the rise and fall of many political parties through different coups in many Arab countries, and most recently the Lebanese civil war and the Palestinian Intifada. All these events are carefully reflected in the literary works of writers of this period, especially women.

As I illustrated above, women writers of the third generation express a clear desire to transcend the traditional feminist themes of women’s relationships with men and their oppositions to patriarchy while reflecting these harsh political realities. Therefore, they endeavour to expand and enlarge the thematic concerns and literary

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<sup>200</sup> Jayyūsī, ‘Modernist Arab Women Writers’, pp. 29-30.

<sup>201</sup> Badran and Cooke (1990), p. xxi.

styles of their predecessors in order to forge what we might call in the context of this thesis integrated feminist and nationalist causes. Consequently, I propose the term *avant-gardes* to refer to this third generation, to which al-Sammān and Khalīfah belong. According to Elisabeth Kendall, this term indicates that “a work or writer is advancing away from dominant norms of taste and style towards a new literary future.”<sup>202</sup> Women writers from the third generation fall under this definition. Their innovation is exemplified in the way they deepen and amplify the historical and political legacy of women’s writing in the Mashriq by implementing new thematic concerns and literary techniques (existentialism and critical realism in the case of al-Sammān and Khalīfah, respectively).

Moreover, on avant-gardism, art, and aesthetics, David LeHardy Sweet observes that “the Avant-garde conceives of art in a radically historical way: i.e., not simply as the latest style or fad succeeding another in a process of repetition, variation, and assimilation, but as a desire to change the relations of aesthetic production for the future.”<sup>203</sup> This artistic attitude towards aesthetics is further underlined by Peter Burger in his realisation of ‘aestheticism’ as being “the necessary precondition of the avant-gardiste intent.”<sup>204</sup> In the context of this thesis, I consider al-Sammān and Khalīfah *avant-gardes* for their literary contribution exceeds the limits of ‘repetition’ and ‘assimilation’ of the writings of previous generations of women authors; rather their

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<sup>202</sup> Elisabeth Kendall, *Literature, Journalism and the Avant-Garde: Intersection in Egypt*, (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 4.

<sup>203</sup> David LeHardy Sweet, ‘Edward Said and the Avant-Garde’, *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* (Edward Said and Critical Decolonization), No. 25 (2005), pp. 149-176 (150).

<sup>204</sup> Peter Burger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 49-50.

writings deploy aestheticism to criticise social and political realities<sup>205</sup> while expressing these realities artistically in creative forms of existentialism and realism through advancing a set of novels that can be read independently yet still form a series. In unison, the *avant-gardism* of al-Sammān and Khalīfah is admirably illustrated through the amalgam of their subject-matters and novel literary styles.

It is in the literary production of these *avant-gardists*, including al-Sammān and Khalīfah, that one can explore the development of modern women's literature in the Mashriq. The following chapter will illustrate this progression by tracing the thematic concerns of Arab women writers from the three generations outlined above, and the techniques which they employ in their writings. Subsequently, the following argument endeavours to remedy the neglect of critics, such as Badran and Cooke, in their classification of these *avant-gardists* alongside women writers from earlier generations; rather I shall highlight the *avant-gardists*'s literary breakthroughs and point out their major contribution to the development of Arab feminism.

## **CONCLUSION**

This chapter presents a historical overview of the social, political, and literary trends which affect the feminist movement in the Arab Middle East, especially the Levant. It sheds light on Arab women's early participation in literary and political activities in their societies from the pre- and early Islamic eras. This is followed by a

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<sup>205</sup> Sweet states that Edward Said agrees with Peter Burger that "the Avant-garde's great merit is its capacity for self-criticism, but that its formal means almost always require discursive supplementation." See Sweet, 'Edward Said and the Avant-Garde', p. 155. Al-Sammān's and Khalīfah's choice of existentialism and realism meet this 'discursive supplementation' requirement.

brief chronological account of the most important political events in the Mashriq during the last century and the rise of Arab nationalisms. This general overview serves as a necessary background to the works of contemporary women writers in the Mashriq. It explains the motives and stimulus of the nationalist trend in the writings of contemporary Arab feminists in the Mashriq.

Moreover, this chapter categorises women writers in the Mashriq in three generations. This classification is not based on the dates of their birth; rather it is based on the dates of their contribution to the literary scene through writings and publications. It attempts to explore the development of feminist movement in the Mashriq since its rise late in the nineteenth century to the present day. Therefore, this chapter provides, through the general exploration of the works of women writers in the Mashriq from these three generations, comprehensive material by which we can trace the movement of thematic concerns in feminist writings in the Mashriq in the following chapter. It also identifies the third generation of women writers as *avant-gardes*. This categorisation of the most prominent women writers in the Mashriq provides a general backdrop against which the nationalist and feminist nature of the *avant-gardes* among whom al-Sammān and Khalīfah, the main concerns of this thesis, stand as exceptional. The following chapter will offer a general conceptualisation of Arab feminism which is necessary for an understanding of the thematic and aesthetic concerns of Arab women's writings, especially those of the *avant-gardes*.

## CHAPTER TWO

### VICIOUS CYCLE: CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF CONTEMPORARY ARAB FEMINISMS IN THE MASHRIQ

This chapter presents the different concepts of feminisms which are valid in the writings of the three generations of contemporary women writers in the Mashriq delineated in the previous chapter through an analysis of the thematic concerns of their literary productions. The first section of this chapter attempts to define the concept of feminism which is adopted by the majority of women writers examined here. It also sheds light on the terminology used in this regard. The second section examines the development of literary feminist discourse in the Mashriq which will be further illuminated in the study of the dynamism of thematic concerns of Arab feminist literature. This argument will propose a new method of understanding Arab feminism beyond the ‘waves’ of Western feminism and explore the circular nature of feminist discourse in the Mashriq or what we might call in the context of this thesis the *vicious cycle mode*, which helps to indentify the repetition of the initial feminist demands of the *pioneers* and the *inward-looking* generation in the works of the *avant-gardes*.

Though the use of the terms ‘Arab feminism’, ‘Middle Eastern feminism’, or even ‘Levantine feminism’ is still controversial, I will employ these terms while

exploring the literary feminist trends in the Mashriq. This conceptualisation of Arab and Levantine feminism will establish the main outlines within which both al-Sammān and Khalīfah explore and introduce new dimensions to literary feminisms within contemporary Arabic literature as will be demonstrated in the following chapters.

### **ARAB FEMINISM: TERMINOLOGY AND DEFINITION**

In the first instance, it is worth mentioning that to the present day there is no specific term in Arabic to refer to feminism.<sup>1</sup> Badran and Cooke consider the first term indicating feminism to have appeared in the Arab World in 1909 with the publication of Bāḥithat al-Bādiyah's *Al-Nisā'īyyāt*.<sup>2</sup> Later, in 1923, another term, *nisā'ī*,<sup>3</sup> was used by women in the Egyptian Feminist Union (al-Ittiḥād al-Nisā'ī al-Miṣrī) to indicate the feminist characteristic of their activities. Booth states that the "term *nisā'ī* itself was malleable. Although the variant *nisawī* (*al-niswiyya*) is now used by feminists, in the early 1920s *nisā'ī* came to mean 'feminist' as well as 'women's,' depending on the

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<sup>1</sup> See Badran and Cooke (1990), p. xvii, Abu-Lughod, 'Feminist Longings', p. 22, and Badran (1995), p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> Badran and Cooke (1990), p. xvii. Transliteration is mine. Badran and Cooke explain this term as 'meaning women's pieces or feminist pieces.' See p. xxxvii, note 2. According to Zeidan, Bāḥithat al-Bādiyah launched "a female literary identity in the Arab world" with her *Al-Nisā'īyyāt*. See Zeidan (1995), p. 85.

<sup>3</sup> Badran and Cooke (1990), p. xvii. Transliteration is mine. It is noteworthy that this term has been used as early as 1920 in a less political agenda with the foundation of The Women's Literary Club (al-Nādī al-Adabī al-Nisā'ī) in Syria in 1920. This term has been used afterwards by other women's parties and associations. In 1928, The Syro-Lebanese Feminist Union (al-Ittiḥād al-Nisā'ī al-Sūrī al-Lubnānī) was founded. In 1942 Fāṭimah Ni'mat Rāshid founded The National Feminist Party (al-Ḥizb al-Nisā'ī al-Qawmī) to demand Egyptian women's political rights. In 1944, The Union of Feminist Associations (Ittiḥād al-Jam'iyyāt al-Nisā'īyyah) in Syria was found. See Zeidan (1995), pp. 35-7. This fact has probably led Baron to associate the term 'Nisā'īyyah' (feminine of *nisā'ī*) with feminism while highlighting the necessity of determining the feminist connotation of this term in the context. See Beth Baron, *The Women's Awakening in Egypt: Culture, Society, and the Press*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 6.

context”.<sup>4</sup> It is still contentious to adopt such ambiguous terms in academic studies to describe feminist movement and activities in the Arab world. Thus it is extremely difficult to provide a definition of Arab feminism using a specific Arabic term.

For a definition of feminism, *al-Mawrid* English-Arabic dictionary describes it as “a theory of equality between the two sexes politically, economically, and socially.”<sup>5</sup> It is interesting that in the Arabic-English edition of *al-Mawrid* dictionary the word ‘feminism’ comes under the word “*niswīyah*” and is explained between brackets as “theory, movement, etc.”<sup>6</sup> while the word “feminine” comes under the word “*nisā’ī*”.<sup>7</sup> While in the same dictionary there is no mention of feminism under “theory”, yet the term “women’s liberation movement” comes under the word movement, that is, “*ḥarakah*” in “*ḥarakat taḥrīr al-mar’ah*”<sup>8</sup>. Finally, an English-English dictionary states that feminism is “the belief and aim that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men; the struggle to achieve this aim.”<sup>9</sup> Therefore, a simple search does not offer an adequate definition of the term feminism in either Arabic or English.

In the context of the debate surrounding Arab feminism and its relevant terminology, reference must be made to the word ‘harem’ which is often used in

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<sup>4</sup> Booth, ‘*Woman in Islam*’, p. 176. Badran asserts this argument, she states that “*Nisa’iyyah* is an ambiguous term in Arabic that can signify anything pertaining to women; sometimes it denotes ‘feminist’ and sometimes ‘feminine.’” Badran (1995), p. 19.

<sup>5</sup> See Munīr Ba‘albakī, *Al-Mawrid: A Modern English-Arabic Dictionary*, (Bayrūt: Dār El-‘ilm Lil-Malāyen, 2002; 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1967), p. 342. Translation is mine.

<sup>6</sup> See Rohī Ba‘albakī, *Al-Mawrid: A Modern Arabic-English Dictionary*, (Bayrūt: Dār El-‘ilm Lil-Malāyen, 2001; 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1987 ), p. 1170. Translation from this source is mine unless otherwise mentioned.

<sup>7</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 1168.

<sup>8</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 286.

<sup>9</sup> A. S. Hornby, *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English*, Sally Wehmeier (Ed.), (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2000), p. 466.



Western and orientalist studies on the seclusion and oppression of Arab women.<sup>10</sup> Harem—*hareem* and/or *nisā'* in Arabic—means according to *al-Mawrid*: “women; female members of the family.”<sup>11</sup> However, the English-Arabic dictionary defines *hareem* as “women’s wing in an old Islamic palace; wives, concubines, and maids within this wing”.<sup>12</sup> In Arabic, *hareem* is derived from the word *harām* which can be translated as “inviolable, taboo; sacred, sacrosanct, and holy”.<sup>13</sup> Leila Ahmed illustrates the misinterpretation and application of this term by orientalist and Western scholars to refer to Arab or Muslim women’s oppression in their segregated spaces. She argues that since the word *hareem* is derived from the word *harām* which could also mean “forbidden”, for Ahmed this is an indication that “it was women who were doing the forbidding, excluding men from their society”.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, *hareem* empowers Arab and Muslim women and provides them with their own space in which they are free to exercise their numerous activities and declare their solidarity.<sup>15</sup> While ‘harem’ is mostly used in Western scholars’ debates on Arab women’s spatial segregation, it is hardly used by Arab women themselves in their literary feminist discourse, and exceptionally in a few instances when it has been used allegorically.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For a general overview of the orientalist discourse and implementation of the term ‘harem’ see Golley, ‘Is Feminism Relevant’, pp. 523-4. See also Leila Ahmed, ‘Western Ethnocentrism and Perceptions of the Harem’, *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 3, (Autumn, 1982), pp. 521-534 (524-6)

<sup>11</sup> Ba’albaki (2001), p. 466.

<sup>12</sup> Ba’albaki (2002), p. 414.

<sup>13</sup> Ba’albaki (2001), p. 460.

<sup>14</sup> Ahmed, ‘Western Ethnocentrism’, pp. 529.

<sup>15</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 528-531. Ahmed gives the Saudi society as an example. She underlines how the structure of this society declares women’s space “inviolable” and “offer men less control than Western society, where women live dispersed and isolated among men.” (p. 528) Towards the end of the article, Ahmed does emphasise that Saudi society’s “every law and institution is controlled by men, and designed . . . to serve and maintain an uncompromising male control.” (p. 531)

<sup>16</sup> For instance, El Saadawi in her introduction to *The Hidden Face of Eve* states that during the Turkish Empire Arab women “were condemned to toil, to hide behind the veil, to quiver in the prison of a Harem fenced in by high walls, iron bars, windowless rooms, and the ever present eunuchs on guard

It is problematic, and controversial, to apply a Western definition of feminism to the feminism of the Mashriq because of the obvious dissimilarity in the cultural, social, and political systems between the West and the East.<sup>17</sup> However, Karen Offen, in her attempts to produce a historically-based definition of feminism, offers an international definition which accommodates different cultures and political systems.<sup>18</sup> Offen, though in her study relies mainly on Western cultures, (that is, European and American), gives feminism its international scope by considering it as an *ideology*.<sup>19</sup> Offen's consideration of feminism as an ideology justifies its broad scope to encompass the diverse implementations and adaptation applicable to different cultures including Arabic culture(s). This is illustrated by Barbara Ryan who acknowledges that

Ideology provides the rationale for how people lead their lives; it is a belief system for how things should be. Disagreement with prevailing ideology leads to the formation of an alternative ideology, a crucial component for social movement development. . . . A second function of ideology is the establishment of a framework for individuals to connect with others through common experiences. The development of a challenging ideology, then, provides an alternative worldview uniting diverse individuals into a group with a common interest in changing the status quo.<sup>20</sup>

Ryan's account of ideology is set in relation to feminism. The way Ryan sets ideology in connection with social change which unites individuals in different social settings,

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with their swords." See Nawal El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*, Trans. and ed. Sherif Hetata (London: Zed Press, 1980), p. iii.

<sup>17</sup> For a brief discussion of this controversy, see Cooke (1996), pp. 3-4.

<sup>18</sup> Karen Offen, 'Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach', *Signs*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Autumn, 1988), pp. 119-157 (120-1).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150. Emphasis is mine.

<sup>20</sup> Barbara Ryan, *Feminism and the Women's Movement: Dynamics of Change in Social Movement, Ideology and Activism*, (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 60.

emphasises the legitimacy of applying Offen's definition of feminism to Arab feminism.

For Offen, feminism is "a concept that can encompass both an *ideology* and a *movement* for sociopolitical change based on a critical analysis of male privilege and women's subordination within any given society. [Yet] feminism posits gender . . . as the primary category of analysis."<sup>21</sup> What makes this comprehensive definition applicable to any culture is the mere consideration that "[f]eminism makes claims for a *rebalancing between women and men* of the social, economic, and political power within a given society, on behalf of both sexes in the name of their common humanity, but with respect for their differences."<sup>22</sup> Thus Offen tries to break the traditional male norm set by feminists, mainly radical<sup>23</sup>, who aspire to attain women's rights and freedom in comparison to what their male companions have.<sup>24</sup> Based on this definition, Offen considers a feminist "any persons, female or male, [who are necessarily] at odds with male-dominated culture and society."<sup>25</sup> In this sense, Offen's definition underpins some feminist activists' awareness of the impossibility "to equalize the position of women in any part of the present social system because the system rests on the inequality of women. But to equalize women is to destabilize and eventually eradicate the system."<sup>26</sup> This awareness is applicable to Arab women's feminism whose challenging social, economic, and political realities undermine the call for total equality with men. Instead, it calls for what Offen acknowledges as '*rebalancing between men*

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<sup>21</sup> Offen, 'Defining Feminism', p. 151. Emphasis is mine.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 151-2. Emphasis is mine.

<sup>23</sup> For a general overview of radical feminisms, see Ryan (1992), p. 55.

<sup>24</sup> Offen, 'Defining Feminism', p. 123.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 152.

<sup>26</sup> Interview of anonymous member of Grassroots Group, quoted in Ryan (1992), p. 84.

*and women*' as the following chapters will illustrate through the analysis of literary feminisms in the writings of al-Sammān and Khalīfah.

I will adopt Offen's comprehensive definition of feminism and feminists. I base my implementation of this Western-based definition on the simple fact that "solidarity among women is based not solely on recognition of a common oppression but also, historically speaking, on a celebration of shared and differential experience as members of the same sex, the childbearing and nurturing sex."<sup>27</sup> This simple fact highlights the similarities between the experiences of Arab and Western women. Moreover, Offen's concept of feminism offers broader aspects than the concept employed by Badran and Cooke which "involves one or more of the following: an awareness by women that as women they are systematically placed in a disadvantaged position; some form of rejection of enforced behaviours and thought; and attempts to interpret their own experiences and then to improve their position or lives as women."<sup>28</sup> Offen's notion of feminism as both an *ideology* and a *movement* encompasses a broader sense of awareness and activism than that of Badran and Cooke which can be hardly perceived beyond the lines of gender discrimination and women's solidarity. Since this thesis focuses on feminist literary activism in times of national crises in the Mashriq, the "sociopolitical" and "gender" aspects of Offen's feminism are typically applicable to the course of this study. However, feminist experience seems to have similar cross-cultural features. Offen states that throughout generations and cultures there is always "one common thread running through [feminists'] arguments: what they share . . . is the impetus to critique and improve the disadvantaged status of women relative to men

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<sup>27</sup> Offen, 'Defining Feminism', pp. 155-6.

<sup>28</sup> Badran and Cooke (1990), pp. xviii-xix.

within a particular cultural situation.”<sup>29</sup> Accordingly, I find Offen’s feminist critique applicable to the literary analysis of modern Arab feminist literature. Bearing in mind the cultural and historical differences, a clarification of necessary distinctions will be offered whenever needed.

### **THE DEVELOPMENT OF LITERARY FEMINIST DISCOURSE IN THE MASHRIQ**

The same classification of women writers in the Mashriq according to the dates of their contribution to the literary scene can be adopted to trace the thematic development of Arab literary feminist concerns. Therefore, I will consider three phases in the development of Arab feminist literary discourse which correspond to the three generations of women writers as identified above. Since various factors affect this process through these three phases, this section will explore the impact of sociopolitical factors—such as the clash with the West, social and class divisions, and political conditions in the Mashriq—on feminist literature.

Western colonialism has evidently affected the literary techniques, genres, and thematic concerns of the literary productions of Arab writers including feminists. The clash with the West forms a new literary trend since “[i]n their search for identity, Arab writers have for many generations often tried to define themselves in relation to the other, the other being in most cases the European.”<sup>30</sup> Arab women writers are no exception to this new trend. Badāwī associates the outset of modern Arabic literature to

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<sup>29</sup> Offen, ‘Defining Feminism’, p. 132.

<sup>30</sup> Badāwī, ‘The Background’, p. 5.

“the emergence of literature as a *mimesis*, as an imitation of life”.<sup>31</sup> Through this “*mimesis*” modern Arabic literature develops its style preserving its own individuality which is shaped by a reflection of harsh reality affected by various types of colonialisms. Thus Western colonialism provides Arab *littérateurs*, especially women, with new subject matters in which they mirrored what Badāwī calls the ‘concrete observable reality’.

Alongside Western influence, the division of social classes in Arab societies of the Mashriq plays a major role in the categorisation of thematic concerns in Arab women’s writings. The pioneering women writers who mostly came from urban upper and middle classes were considered privileged in comparison to women from lower classes.<sup>32</sup> Their advantageous conditions provided them with education<sup>33</sup> and also offered them access to Western literature which raised their consciousness of how unprivileged they were in comparison to their Western contemporaries. Therefore, their claims were limited to their own ‘class’ problems. It did not include the suffering of women from other lower classes. Consequently, the themes of the *pioneers’* literature reflect the consciousness and needs of bourgeois women and form a type of literature which is tailored to fit certain aristocratic upper and middle classes with total

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>32</sup> Cooke, ‘Arab Women Writers’, p. 443. Mention should be made of the fact that out of the four pioneering women I have chosen, Fawwāz is the only one who does not come from a bourgeois background. However, she had access to education through the support of her mistress who represents this class. Fawwāz is thus best thought of as an exception contrary to Cooke’s view, in which she uses Fawwāz’s case to disprove the “notion that it was only upper-class women who had access to education” (Ibid., p. 445).

<sup>33</sup> See Badran and Cooke (1990), p. xxvi, where they discuss how differently education was introduced to women and men thus delaying the contribution of women to the literary scene. This fact hindered the recognition of women’s writings in the first two generations since it took longer for women from lower classes to be provided with education. Yet among the third generation there are women from different classes. This was the outcome of the change of social and political systems which in turn offered education to more women.

negligence to the needs of rural and nomadic women.<sup>34</sup> This was the case for the *inward-looking* generation as well. It is only in the second half of the twentieth century that women writers started tackling issues reflecting the demands of women from poor classes.<sup>35</sup>

This aristocratic background explains the tendency of *the pioneers* towards poetry, the tradition which is still adopted by the following generations to a lesser degree. These bourgeois women were brought up, within traditional families, to appreciate classical literature. They wrote poetry as means of preserving traditional genres despite the fact that “women writers, to gain recognition, had to adjust to literary norms and standards established by men.”<sup>36</sup> However, this adoption took another dimension with the encounter with the West. The novel and the short story were the main two literary genres which ensued from the clash with Europe. These new forms started to be more popular by mid-twentieth century. The development of these new genres is obvious in the writings of the *inward-looking* generation,<sup>37</sup> as we will see in the following section.

In spite of these new genres, bourgeois women from the last two generations, such as Ghādah al-Sammān, kept the tradition of writing poetry as a mark of their classical affiliation. Another characteristic of this group of bourgeois women is the fact that most of them are indebted to their fathers. Al-Taymūriyyah, al-Yāzījī, and later al-

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<sup>34</sup> See Zeidan (1995), p. 38. Zeidan sets “the battle around the veil” as an example of urban women’s feminist struggle in which rural women were totally ignored since veiling was mainly practised in cities. See also Badran (1995), pp. 4-5.

<sup>35</sup> The continuous social and political conflicts in the Mashriq during the second half of the twentieth century helped, to an extent, to decrease class barriers which brought women from different social classes to share similar destiny and experience.

<sup>36</sup> Zeidan (1995), p. 42.

<sup>37</sup> See Kilpatrick, ‘Women and Literature’, pp. 79-80.

Sammān were supported by extraordinary fathers who helped them to cultivate and nourish their talents. Without such paternal support, it is unlikely that these women would have had the chance to express themselves through writing, thus establishing what can be seen today as feminist literature.

Although this bourgeois background facilitates, to an extent, the mission of Arab feminists, and despite the encouragement of early male thinkers such as al-Bustānī who described women's professional writing as *ṣinā'ah sharīfah* (noble craft)<sup>38</sup>, it is not an easy task for women to embark upon writing as a profession. Hilary Kilpatrick states that "[a] woman in the Arab world who wants to be a writer encounters obstacles above all in her family circle, and these obstacles are economic and above all social in nature."<sup>39</sup> This fact is reflected clearly in the life of many Arab women writers especially among *the pioneers*. Al-Taymūriyyah, for instance, had to surrender to the marital duties and social pressures and restrictions of her time. Because of the veil which limited her interaction with the outside world, she stopped writing for few years to resume again after the death of her father and husband.<sup>40</sup> Yet al-Taymūriyyah was not alone in her suffering. Many other Arab women writers of her generation went through the same experience. Bāḥithat al-Bādiyah had to give up teaching after marriage.<sup>41</sup> *Al-Fatāh*, the first women's magazine in Arabic, had been stopped after the marriage of its founder Ḥind Nawfal.<sup>42</sup> This fact brought *the pioneers* side by side with their contemporaries in different parts of the world in their struggle against the social

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<sup>38</sup> See al-Bustānī (1990), p. 49.

<sup>39</sup> Kilpatrick, 'Women and Literature', p. 87.

<sup>40</sup> Zeidan (1995), pp. 60, 82.

<sup>41</sup> See Badran and Cooke (1990), p. 134.

<sup>42</sup> Baron (1994), p. 16. See also Kilpatrick, 'Women and Literature', p. 75.



restrictions, mainly familial, which hindered their literary output.<sup>43</sup> Thus at the time of *the pioneers*, Arab feminism was more or less concurrent with feminist movements in other parts of the world. But this was, and still is, not the case of the following two generations.

On the one hand, early in the twentieth century, the second generation of Arab feminists, the *inward-looking* generation, was still confined in the realms of traditional social institutions while their contemporary Western feminists managed to break social restrictions and reach an advanced stage in terms of women's rights of suffrage, for instance. Unfortunately, some of the *avant-gardes* still have to fight for *de jure* rights and tolerate many obstacles due to the largely dominant patriarchal social norms in the Mashriq while second-wave Western feminists moved on with their struggle to focus on *de facto* rights.<sup>44</sup> The limited spaces and facilities offered to women in different Arab countries by their families and societies explain their lag behind their Western contemporaries and affect to a large extent their literary production to the present day.<sup>45</sup> Such facts highlight the difference between Western and Eastern feminisms in the twentieth century.

On the other hand, these social restrictions and the limited interaction with the outside community created a fundamental difference between the writings of men and women, especially feminists. It has been argued that feminist concerns have been

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<sup>43</sup> See Jayyūsī, 'Modernist Arab Women Writers', p. 2.

<sup>44</sup> For more information on American second-wave feminist achievements after winning suffrage see Ryan (1992), pp. 34-51.

<sup>45</sup> It is worth noting here that there have been always some exceptions. Women writers like Fadwā Tūqān and Ghādah al-Sammān represent the minority who managed to survive the male dominated literary field and escape social restrictions with the support of their immediate families (as already stated above) and by writing in a language which is acceptable to men (see Chapter One for a discussion of Tūqān's case).

considered publicly for almost the first time by the Egyptian male liberal intellectual Qāsim Amīn and some of his colleagues such as Luṭfī al-Sayyid, Muḥammad ‘Abduh, and Rashīd Riḍā, as illustrated in Chapter One.<sup>46</sup> In fiction, attention has been paid to the status of women almost for the first time in 1913 in *Zaynab* which is considered the first ‘real’ novel in Arabic by Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal (1888-1956).<sup>47</sup> These early feminist claims by male writers, who based their argument on a mere comparison with Western societies, focused on education to improve the situation of Arab women in order to make society progressive<sup>48</sup>, the claim which was carried by *the pioneers*.<sup>49</sup>

Amīn’s *The Liberation of Women* (1899) can be seen as the product of his four-year educational mission at Montpellier in France where he was exposed to Western culture, Marxism and Darwinism—among other theories— which he combined with his knowledge of Islam in the production of this book.<sup>50</sup> Amīn’s book is renowned for igniting the first spark of Arab feminism, despite the earlier calls of feminist women who were rather less visible and who mostly conducted their debate within their segregated, confined spaces, a phenomenon best illustrated in their memoirs, correspondence with each other, oral histories, and journals.<sup>51</sup> Though Amīn was not

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<sup>46</sup> See Cooke, ‘Arab Women Writers’, p. 443. See also Cole, ‘Feminism’, pp. 392-3, 401.

<sup>47</sup> Allen, ‘The Mature Arabic Novel’, p. 211. See also Allen, ‘The Beginnings of the Arabic Novel’, in *Modern Arabic Literature*, M. M. Badāwī (Ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 180-192 (190).

<sup>48</sup> See Cole, ‘Feminism’, pp. 400-401. See also Badran and Cooke (1990), p. xix.

<sup>49</sup> For an example of pioneering feminist writers’ account on the importance and necessity of education for women see Amīnah al-Sa‘īd’s lecture ‘The Arab Woman and the Challenge of Society’, in Fernea and Bezirgan (1988), p. 382 where she provides information such as the opening of the first secondary school in Cairo in 1925 and that free compulsory education became active in 1932. She illustrates how such facts made Egypt a pioneering country in women’s education comparing to other Arab countries.

<sup>50</sup> See Samiha Sidhom Peterson (Trans.), *The Liberation of Women and The New Woman: Two Documents in the History of Egyptian Feminism*, (Cairo: the American University in Cairo Press, 2000), pp. xi-xii.

<sup>51</sup> See Margot Badran, ‘The Feminist Vision in the Writings of Three Turn-of-the-Century Egyptian Women’, *Bulletin (British Society for Middle Eastern Studies)*, Vol. 15, No. 1/2 (1988), pp. 11-20 (12).

the first to call for women's education and liberation as part of social progress, his authoritatively male voice was heard and accepted by patriarchal society.<sup>52</sup>

Despite the fact that the efforts of Amīn and his colleagues helped to raise awareness of the necessity to improve the plight of women, their motives were not strong enough to fuel feminist debates in a long-term basis. Pioneering female feminists spoke more strongly of their own political and social problems; the power and longevity of their claims produced the contemporary Arab feminism which is led mainly by women rather than men. Therefore, Arab women managed to get acknowledged, though partially, by their societies mainly through their own perseverance and determination, rather than through 'male patronage'.

However, it is worth emphasising the impact of Western cultures on the start of Arab feminism through Amīn's *The Liberation*<sup>53</sup> and later on in the emergence of women's feminist activism. The clash with the West through different types of colonialism in the Mashriq, starting with the British occupation of Egypt in 1882, marks the start of nationalism and the struggle to liberate the land from Western colonial powers. Baron states that after the declaration of Egypt as a British protectorate

The wave of nationalism was a convenient one for women to ride, arguing that all Egyptians had to be mobilized in the struggle for independence. Patriotism served those who might otherwise have been prohibited from a literary vocation. . . . Using nationalism as an excuse did not confine [women writers] to this subject [that is, women's

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Badran and Cooke refer to Wardah al-Yāzījī's poem to Wardah al-Turk in the 1860s; al-Yāzījī's correspondence with al-Taymūriyyah in the 1870s; and the correspondence between Bāhithat al-Bādiyah and Ziyādah early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. See Badran and Cooke (1990), p. xxx. For information about grassroots invisible activism in Egypt in late nineteenth century, see Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, 'The Revolutionary Gentlewomen in Egypt', in Lois Beck & Nikki Keddie (Eds.), *Women in the Muslim World*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), pp. 261-276.

<sup>52</sup> See Badran and Cooke (1990), p. xxix.

<sup>53</sup> For a brief argument on the Western and colonial influence on Amīn see Baron (1994), p. 5.

patriotic duties]. Rather it gave them greater freedom to pursue literary and other endeavors.<sup>54</sup>

Such facts highlight the tendency of critics and historians to connect the emergence of Arab feminism to the rise of nationalism in Egypt in the last decades of the nineteenth century which later spread to other parts of the Arab World including the Mashriq.<sup>55</sup> In literary terms, this interconnection between feminism and nationalism was crystallised in the productions of the *avant-gardes* among other male writers of their generation as will be illustrated in the following chapters.

In addition to the effect of such social factors on the writings of Arab women, political changes in the area play a significant role in the development of their subject matters. Arab feminism blossomed in Egypt early in the twentieth century with the help of Arab intellectuals who migrated to Egypt in order to make their voices heard<sup>56</sup>, including women such as Fawwāz, al-Yāzījī, and Ziyādah<sup>57</sup> to name a few. Towards the mid-twentieth century period, this literary influence passed on to Syria and the two

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<sup>54</sup> Baron (1994), p. 41.

<sup>55</sup> See for instance Philipp, 'Feminism', pp. 277-8.

<sup>56</sup> The Syrian and Lebanese attraction to Egypt goes back to the sixteenth century during the Ottoman Empire which "provided the framework" for commercial, cultural, and political links between Syria and Egypt. Initially, trade, learning, and Catholicism were the main reasons behind the early Syrians and Lebanese migrations to Egypt. For more information see Thomas Philipp, 'Image and Self-Image of the Syrians in Egypt: From the Early Eighteenth Century to the Reign of Muhammad 'Alī', in *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The Functioning of a Plural Society*, Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis (Eds.), Vol. II the Arabic-Speaking Lands, (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, INC., 1982), pp. 167-184 (167-8). In the nineteenth century, later migrations were forced by increasing commerce and the relative freedom of speech during the period of Ismā'īl and Lord Cromer, as mentioned in Chapter One. See Moosa (1997), pp. 17-18.

<sup>57</sup> Cooke, 'Arab Women Writers', p. 443.

countries were considered the two major intellectual centres of the *Nahḍah*,<sup>58</sup> in the Mashriq to which Arab women made remarkable contributions.<sup>59</sup>

The last few decades of the twentieth century witnessed the movement of cultural figures from Cairo to Beirut; the primary culprits for the curtailment of cultural institutions in Egypt were the repression of the Egyptian state under Nasser and Sadat, the economic collapse of Egypt in the 1970s, and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism.<sup>60</sup> Beirut was the destination to which Arab intellectuals headed, reversing by this the earlier *littérateurs*' migration from Beirut to Egypt.<sup>61</sup> This shift marks the beginning of a new literary era in the Arab world. Being located in the Levant, Arab feminist literature had to reflect the general socio-political situation in the region which added a further political nationalist dimension to their thematic concerns. Through such reflections, Levantine feminist fiction has become "more radical in its demand for a restructuring of society."<sup>62</sup> The unravelling Lebanese society of Beirut, for instance, offered the *avant-garde* feminists the opportunity to usher in their radical claims and flourish what has already started in Egypt since almost a century: Arab women's journalism.

Arab women's feminism found its first forum through women's journalism which was launched in Alexandria, Egypt in 1892 by the Lebanese Hind Nawfal who

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<sup>58</sup> Badāwī, 'The Background', p. 12. The word '*Nahḍah*' which means 'cultural renaissance' refers here to modern Arabic literature. See Badāwī, p. 1.

<sup>59</sup> Baron (1994), pp. 38-9. See also Badran and Cooke (1990), p. xxix.

<sup>60</sup> See Badāwī, 'The Background', pp. 14, 20. See also Raymond William Baker, *Egypt's Uncertain Revolution under Nasser and Sadat*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 151-69.

<sup>61</sup> It is worth mentioning that women gained their political rights first in Lebanon in 1953 then in Egypt in 1956. This can be seen as another example on how these two countries were the pioneers in terms of women's political rights which led to greater social and literary freedom for women. See al-Sa'īd's lecture in Fernea and Bezirgan (1988), p. 386.

<sup>62</sup> Cooke, 'Arab Women Writers', p. 454.

founded *Al-Fatāh* (The Young Woman), the first Arabic monthly journal for women.<sup>63</sup> The Lebanese origin of Nawfal highlights the major role played by Lebanese and Syrian emigrants, especially women, in flourishing press in Egypt and ushering in Arab feminism.<sup>64</sup> Zeidan emphasises this point by illustrating that the “pioneers of women’s journalism in Egypt were non-Muslims and non-Egyptians who had some exposure to Western culture and either had a family background in journalism . . . or else enjoyed a great deal of personal freedom and political immunity.”<sup>65</sup> Other examples of these pioneering feminist journals are Alexandra Avierinoh’s *Anīs al-Jalīs*, Munīrah Thābit’s *al-Amal*, and Faṭīmah al-Yūsuf’s *Rūz al-Yūsuf*. These pioneering journalists encountered obstacles such as high rates of illiterate Egyptian women, men’s censorship, and the conservatism of the majority of their readers who were men.<sup>66</sup> Therefore, these women journalists avoided addressing critical feminist issues such as women’s subordination to men in their society. Rather, they limited their feminist articles to issues related to women’s education, household affairs, handiwork, fashion, and entertainment.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> See Booth, ‘*Woman in Islam*’, p. 171. See also Baron (1994), pp. 1, 16.

<sup>64</sup> Kilpatrick, ‘Women and Literature’, p. 75.

<sup>65</sup> Zeidan (1995), p. 46.

<sup>66</sup> For more information about men and their participation/involvement in women’s press in turn-of-the-century Egypt, see Booth, ‘*Woman in Islam*’, pp. 172, 175-193.

<sup>67</sup> Booth distinguishes ‘women’s journals’ from ‘feminist journals’ which “do not dwell (except in theorized and historicizing terms) on bourgeois domesticity or the how-to dailiness that the former encompass. Such distinctions and connotations were absent from what observers then and since labeled the ‘women’s press’ of *fin de siècle* and early-20th-century Egypt.” Booth ‘*Woman in Islam*’ (2001), p. 172. Despite the importance of this distinction, it is not my intention here to expand on such issues. For more information on early women’s journalism in Egypt see Booth, ‘*Woman in Islam*’, pp. 171-176. See also Baron (1994), pp. 13-37 and Zeidan (1995), pp. 46-49.

In spite of these social and religious impediments, women's early journalism "became the platform for social protest as well as for literary expression"<sup>68</sup>, best known as *al-Nahḍah al-Nisā'iyyah* (the women's awakening)<sup>69</sup>. This tradition of women's journalism continued to be the norm until the present. Most of the women writers listed above worked, and perhaps are still working, as journalists. Women writers such as Ghādah al-Sammān and Hūdā Barakāt who started their career as journalists are still practising journalism even after their success as novelists and short-story writers.<sup>70</sup> Thus journalism, despite the aforementioned social and religious limitations, played a fundamental role in ushering in Arab feminism in the Mashriq and maintaining a stable literary manifestation of this movement. However, the thematic concerns of women's writings in the Mashriq experienced a cycle of development in all literary genres adopted by Arab women feminists as the following section will illustrate.

### **THEMATIC CONCERNS IN FEMINIST LITERATURE IN THE MASHRIQ**

This section will trace thematic dynamism in the works of women writers in the Mashriq in the light of the social and political factors mentioned in Chapter One. This will help to identify the development of Arab feminism, especially its literary manifestations, in the Mashriq since its rise in late nineteenth century until the present.

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<sup>68</sup> Cooke, 'Arab Women Writers', p. 447. Zeidan observes that "Labībah Sham'ūn issued an appeal in *Anīs al-Jalīs* for the right of women to participate in literary culture". See Zeidan (1995), p. 47. See also Badran (1995), p. 16.

<sup>69</sup> Baron (1994), p. 2. Transliteration is mine.

<sup>70</sup> Al-Sammān writes for the Arabic weekly news magazine *al-Ḥawādeth* and Barakāt works for Radio Orient in Paris.

In her study of the development of feminist scholarship since the 1960s in the West, that is, second wave of Western feminism, Kandiyoti identifies three main 'phases': 'Combating Androcentric Bias', 'Accounting for the Subordination of Women', and finally 'From Woman to Gender'.<sup>71</sup> Based on this general classification, Kandiyoti suggests three 'waves' of Middle Eastern feminism: 'Feminism and Nationalism', 'The Rise of Social Science Paradigms and Developmentalism', and 'Dialogues within Feminism'.<sup>72</sup> The following discussion employs Kandiyoti's categorisation to illustrate the development of Arab feminist discourse within the three generations of women writers.

On the one hand, Arab feminists seem to join the debate of Kandiyoti's first phase which "was characterized by efforts to establish the field of 'women's studies' and provided an extensive documentation and critique of androcentric bias in the social sciences."<sup>73</sup> *The pioneers* of Arab feminists criticised women's absence from social and work places. They also disagreed with men's interpretations of women's role according to Islam. This early feminist critique was illustrated in their private memoirs and correspondences with each other, as mentioned above. These important feminist dialogues were articulated as part of the call for social reform as a necessary step for national independence.<sup>74</sup> Hence the feminist calls of *the pioneers* correspond with the first phase of Western feminism and first wave of Middle Eastern feminism, according to Kandiyoti.

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<sup>71</sup> See Kandiyoti, 'Contemporary Feminist Scholarship', pp. 2-7. It is worth noting that while Kandiyoti bases her classification mainly around the second wave of Western feminism, she clearly adopts some of the third wave theories in her exposition of post-structuralism and post-modernism, for instance.

<sup>72</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 8-18.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>74</sup> See Baron (1994), p. 191.



On the other hand, while Western feminists were making progress in the gender asymmetries discourse which developed around liberalism, Marxism/socialism, psychoanalysis, and post-structuralism; Arab women's causes of subordination were sidelined for the sake of general social transformation through modernisation and Marxism according to Kandiyoti's second wave of Middle Eastern feminism.<sup>75</sup> Therefore, Arab feminism was delayed during the 1950s-60s by social transformation and later political crises (the 1967 defeat, Lebanese civil war, and the Palestinian Intifada).<sup>76</sup> Despite their attempts to approach the liberal, socialist, and psychoanalytic dialogue and move forward with their feminist critique, the delay of the 1950s and 1960s caused Arab feminists to lag behind their Western counterparts who were by the mid-1980s already engaged in gender discourse. Hence the application of Kandiyoti's third wave to Arab women's writings is questionable since Arab feminism is still engaged with the debates of the second wave.

I would like to propose a different understanding of Middle Eastern women's feminist writings, especially in the Mashriq. This new account recognises that Arab feminism goes beyond the 'waves' of Western feminist thoughts, and even Kandiyoti's suggested waves of Middle Eastern feminism. Instead, the following argument proposes analysis of the circular nature of Arab feminism since its rise late in the nineteenth century until the present. It explores how the harsh realities of the modern Middle East—whether political, economic, or social—prevent Arab feminism from developing according to Western feminist 'wave' style. Rather, these circumstances cause Arab

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<sup>75</sup> See Kandiyoti, 'Contemporary Feminist Scholarship', pp. 4-6, 10-11.

<sup>76</sup> Golley emphasises this delay and explains how feminists of the second and third generation had to "fight certain battles all over again." See Golley, 'Is Feminism Relevant', p. 533.

feminism to move time and again in what this study acknowledges as the *vicious cycle mode*<sup>77</sup> where feminist demands of *the pioneers* and *inward-looking* generation are still claimed by *avant-garde* Arab feminists. The following analysis will present an account of the development of thematic concerns in the writings of women in the Mashriq in the light of this argument.

The time of *the pioneers* witnessed an increased awareness of gender differentiation and women's rights which was derived, to a large extent, from their indirect contact with Europeans.<sup>78</sup> The encounter with their European contemporaries displayed the unprivileged status which society accorded Arab women late in the nineteenth century. Thus, in order to improve their status, *the pioneers* embarked upon the call for gender equality and women's rights of education and work. In this sense, al-Yāziǧī, Fawwāz, al-Taymūriyyah, and Bāḥithat al-Bādiyah are considered by Cooke to be “echoing the questions that social reformers were asking. Why were women debarred from education and professional opportunities? Was gender a sufficient reason? What effect did their invisibility have on society?”<sup>79</sup> Despite *the pioneers'* efforts to give voice to their beliefs through their memoirs and correspondences, their calls were initially echoed through journalism which until the late nineteenth century

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<sup>77</sup> It is worth mentioning that the concept of the *vicious cycle mode* applied in this thesis is different from Zeidan's concept of 'vicious circle theme' which refers to the tendency of some Arab women writers—who tackle themes related to the 'quest for personal identity'—to create in their novels a circular dynamic movement where their female protagonists run away from home which represents a miniature of the larger restricted conventional society, to the outside world only to come back to home. These female protagonists refuse to accept their prescribed social roles as mothers and wives so they attempt to escape, the experience which renders mostly in failure. Hence they “end up living the life they tried to avoid, thus getting caught in the 'vicious circle'”. Zeidan considers Ba'albakī's *I Live* the first novel to represent this 'vicious circle theme'. Another example is Colette Khūrī's *Ayyām Ma'ahu (Days with Him)*. See Zeidan (1995), pp. 98, 145, 148. The concept of the *vicious cycle mode* as applied in this thesis is concerned mainly with the dynamism of the thematic concerns of Arab literary feminist movement as will be illustrated later.

<sup>78</sup> Cooke, 'Arab Women Writers', p. 443.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 446.

was run and controlled mainly by men.<sup>80</sup> Through these early journalistic publications, *the pioneers* reflected their isolation and the unfair treatment they had in their limited communities and expressed a conscious refusal to accept their conditions.

Hilary Kilpatrick believes that none of the pioneering women writers “made a significant contribution to the Arabic literature of her time. . . . Their importance lies above all in the fact that they expressed the desire of women to improve their situation”<sup>81</sup> in comparison to that of their male contemporaries. A more recent argument can be made in this regard taking into account the nature of the patriarchal society of these women writers. *The pioneers* launched basic calls for their rights in restricted patriarchal societies which did not welcome their participation in the male dominated literary scene thus limiting their literary production, as exemplified above in reference to the limitations of the issues addressed in women’s journals. However, their calls were recognised by serious actions like “the general Syrian Congress’s discussion of Syrian women’s rights to vote and be members of the Parliament in March 1920”<sup>82</sup> and the founding of the Egyptian Feminist Union in 1923. These facts underline the liberal attitudes which were prevalent at the beginning of last century and which, without the intervention of colonialism and political conflicts, promised a brighter future for Arab women. Yet the long established patriarchal society supported by Islamic culture hindered Arab women’s recognition within their communities which resulted in the limited number of women activist feminists at that time. These appeals, though initially launched as feminist claims, did not lead to a vital change in women’s situation. Thus

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<sup>80</sup> Badran and Cooke (1990), pp. xxx-xxxi. See also Booth (2001), p. 110.

<sup>81</sup> Kilpatrick, ‘Women and Literature’, p. 76.

<sup>82</sup> Jayyūsī, ‘Modernist Arab Women Writers’, p. 9.

the *inward-looking* generation had to carry on the same feminist demands of *the pioneers* yet in a broader sense.

The works of women writers from the *inward-looking* generation, Ziyādah and al-Malā'ikah for example, deal with themes such as “the search for one’s own identity and for love, fear of death, resistance to paralysing traditions and commitment to one’s people in weal and woe”.<sup>83</sup> However, it is this *inward-looking* generation which started what one might call *the sexual revolution* in modern Arabic literature. Laylā Ba‘albakī launched this revolution when she “dared to accuse society . . . in black and white”.<sup>84</sup> Hanan Awwad argues that “sex plays a very important role in [Ba‘albakī’s] novels as she sees sexual freedom, for the Arab woman, as the first step towards obtaining control over her own identity.”<sup>85</sup> The sexual context of her 1958 novel *Anā Aḥyā (I Live)* is considered rebellious in the way her female protagonist, Līnā, dares to challenge her conservative society in search of self-fulfilment. The same theme and style is prevalent in her 1964 collection of short stories *Safīnat Ḥanān ilā al-Qamar (Spaceship of Tenderness to the Moon)*. Although Ba‘albakī’s defiance against the family in particular and society in general, is regarded by critics like Ḥalīm Barakāt as egotistic and narcissistic in that her works are preoccupied with the ‘individual’,<sup>86</sup> Ba‘albakī’s employment of sexual expressions as way of asserting gender identity, launched what I would like to call a *literary sexual revolution* in the history of Arab feminism. In this sense, her works were considered to “sound the bugle to a new stage in women’s

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<sup>83</sup> Kilpatrick, ‘Women and Literature’, p. 79.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>85</sup> Awwad (1983), p. 20.

<sup>86</sup> See Halim Barakat, *The Arab World: Society, Culture, and State*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 225-6.

writings: not only to challenge society but also to assert their own needs and strengths as women.”<sup>87</sup> Ba‘albakī opened the door widely for Arab women of her generation, and generations to follow, to vent their isolation and oppression especially sexual.<sup>88</sup>

Even with such audacious subject matters, this *inward-looking* generation could be still classified under Kandiyoti’s first phase of ‘Combating Androcentric Bias’ in their attempts to demand recognition for their social role. Other liberal feminist demands of *de jure* nature and self-fulfilment, especially sexual, such as Ba‘albakī’s, cause the occasional overlapping with Kandiyoti’s second phase of ‘Accounting for the Subordination of Women’. In a way, this can be seen as a result of the struggle of women writers of the *inward-looking* generation to break through the backward social doctrines which already hindered their predecessors. This struggle against traditional norms caused the slow progress of their writings.

Moreover, Zeidan acknowledges that as the writings of the *inward-looking* generation dealt with the search for personal identity, the novels

drew heavily upon the lives of their authors, being filled with autobiographical or semiautobiographical material. This explains why each novelist’s first book was usually her best, since the writers tended to exhaust their material in the first book and later ones were merely repetition or expansion of themes which the earlier work had already covered. . . . The shortage of material was partly due to the cramped lives of the novelists themselves (who, after all, were themselves limited by having to live in the restrictive society they were depicting).<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Cooke, ‘Arab Women Writers’, p. 450.

<sup>88</sup> This trend has been adopted passionately by many other women writers of Ba‘albakī’s contemporaries such as Laṭīfah al-Zayyāt (b. 1925) and Najībah al-‘Assāl (b. 1921); see Cooke, ‘Arab Women Writers’, pp. 450-1. In Lebanon, mention must be made of more recent women writers such as Emily Naṣrallāh, Laylā ‘Usayrān, and Ghādah al-Sammān; see Awwad (1983), p. 21.

<sup>89</sup> Zeidan (1982), pp. 354-5.

Zeidan's argument highlights the challenges which faced the writers of the *inward-looking* generation. Their outputs revealed the difficulty of claiming their feminist rights without asserting their gender identity through their autobiographical material, as if they had to reflect Arab women's daily struggle in restricted patriarchal societies through their own stories. Accordingly, the literature of the *inward-looking* generation, though introduced new themes to the bulk of women's writings, reflects these women's struggle to break out of the restricted social traditions which limited their lives and, consequently, their literary production.

Besides social restrictions, this can be partially related to the emergence of new social transformational disciplines, namely modernism and Marxism which neglect women's subordination "in favour of broad indicators of socio-economic development such urbanization, education and industrialization."<sup>90</sup> Consequently, during the first half of the twentieth century Arab feminists were still lingering in Kandiyoti's first two phases, that is, combating androcentric bias while accounting for women's subordination. These women claimed their *de jure* feminist rights by drawing on their own rejection of prescribed gendered roles and struggle with their restricted societies. Despite the fact that, in the literature of the *inward-looking* generation, the "message of refusal was so strong that it unleashed a wave of feminist literature"<sup>91</sup>, the lack of material, the isolation within their communities, and the general social transformation which was taking place at the time, made it very challenging for them to break through this literary confinement and move forward with their feminist demands.

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<sup>90</sup> Kandiyoti, 'Contemporary Feminist Scholarship', p. 11.

<sup>91</sup> Badran and Cooke (1990), p. xxxiv.

Nevertheless, writers of the *inward-looking* generation stamped their production with new genres and literary techniques. As mentioned above, it was within this *inward-looking* generation that the novel and short story were adopted by Arab writers. Kilpatrick states that “[o]f the two, it was the short story which was first successfully cultivated by women, and in this they distinguish themselves from their male colleagues, who at an early stage also showed interest in the novel.”<sup>92</sup> Moreover, the *inward-looking* generation introduced new literary techniques. One of them was through writing dialogues by mixing literary Arabic as well as regional dialects. This tendency was considered by Zeidan as an intention to break the literary norms already set by male writers, such as Najīb Maḥfūz, one of the most important leading novelists in the Arab world, who used only literary Arabic or others who used a certain regional dialect, for instance, Yūsuf Idrīs who used Egyptian dialect. Zeidān regarded this experiment as a failure which makes the dialogues in these women’s novels “very unconvincing”.<sup>93</sup> This technique will be further illustrated in the following chapters while exploring the literary works of Khalīfah, one of the *avant-garde* writers under study. She mixes literary standard Arabic with a Palestinian dialect in most of her

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<sup>92</sup> Kilpatrick, ‘Women and Literature’, p. 79. Kilpatrick gives two examples of women writers who embarked upon the short story. They are the Egyptian Suhayr al-Qalamāwī (b. 1911) and her contemporary ‘Ā’ishah ‘Ābd ar-Raḥmān (b. 1912). According to the categorisation adopted in this thesis, that is, dates of their publications, they both belong to the second generation.

<sup>93</sup> See Zeidan (1982), pp. 356-7. It is interesting that later in 1995, Zeidan states that “Arabic literature is subject to the rules of tradition that holds the Classical Arabic language to be sacred (meaning that changes in the formal language are discouraged). This creates quite a challenge for women writers who, if they are to find their voices, *must change* this patriarchal language that marginalizes them and at the same time must make the language acceptable enough to be published and read by a significant audience.” In this sense, Zeidan highlights the importance of this challenge and justifies women’s writers’ tendency to introduce changes to the traditional sacred language. This partially contradicts his former claim. See Zeidan (1995), p. 2. Emphasis is mine.

novels; a technique which facilitates her implementation of the realist trend as will be discussed later.

Another literary technique to be introduced by the *inward-looking* generation is “the first use of first-person narration in Arabic women’s fiction.”<sup>94</sup> This is employed by Ba‘albakī in *I Live* to “stress the identity and individuality of the protagonist.”<sup>95</sup> Following her antecedent, al-Sammān starts similar tradition by using the same indication to first-person in the titles of her novels yet by the form of the verb—titles such as *Ashhadu ‘Aksa al-Rrīḥ* (*I Certify Against the Wind*) and *A‘lantu ‘Alaika al-Ḥub* (*I Declared Love on You*). Thus the *inward-looking* generation, though have not proved much success in the thematic concerns, they invented new literary techniques to be adopted by later generations.

By the late 1960s Arab feminism defines its own sense of individuality by addressing issues related to sexual freedom and sensuality, while maintaining the initial claims of the first two generations. Allen considers the *avant-gardes* a “voice of feminist writing [which] has become *more daring* in its treatment not only of women’s relationships with and their view of men, but also in their willingness to explore the more emotional and sensual aspects of their own self.”<sup>96</sup> In their daring exploration, the *avant-gardes* broaden their feminist demands to include other human aspects of their society and culture. Al-Sammān, for instance, tackles sensuality and sexual oppression in the Arab world as part of her rejection of all types of oppression including social,

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<sup>94</sup> Zeidan (1982), p. 282.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 282.

<sup>96</sup> Allen, ‘The Mature Arabic Novel’, p. 211. Emphasis is mine. See Chapter One where reference is made to both al-Sammān’s and al-Shaykh’s portrayals of sensuality and sexuality.



economic, and political.<sup>97</sup> Novels such as *Beirut '75* and *Beirut Nightmares* probe pivotal issues of class struggle, national struggle, love, death, Arab women's subordination, and sexuality. Ḥanān al-Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra* addresses physical, emotional, and sexual abuse simultaneously.<sup>98</sup> Therefore, the *avant-gardes* go beyond the achievements of their predecessors, such as Ba'albakī and Khūrī, who were among the first to bring women's sexual oppression to light, yet were so engrossed in reflecting their own frustration that they did not develop their plots beyond the theme of sexuality.<sup>99</sup>

Another thematic concern that distinguishes the *avant-gardes* from their predecessors is nationalism. As mentioned above, early in the twentieth century, Egyptian women took the opportunity of national struggle for independence to embark upon their literary professions and articulate their feminist demands.<sup>100</sup> The same argument can be applied to the literature of the *avant-gardes* which reflects the political conditions in the Mashriq during the last decades of the twentieth century and its impacts on women. The most important events so far are the creation of Israel in 1948, the 1967 Arab defeat, the 1975 Lebanese civil war, and the Palestinian Intifada. These harsh conflicts "generally ended in frustration and bitter disappointment and helped to

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<sup>97</sup> See Ghādah al-Sammān, *al-Qabīlah Tastajwib al-Qatīlah (The Tribe Interrogates the Killed Woman)*, (Bayrūt: Manshūrāt Ghādah al-Sammān, 1990; 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1981), p. 199.

<sup>98</sup> See Zeidan (1995), pp. 205-17.

<sup>99</sup> See Paola De Kapwa, *al-Tamarrud wa al-Iltizām fī Adab Ghādah al-Sammān (Rebellion and Compliance in the Literature of Ghādah al-Sammān)*, (Bayrūt: Dār al-Ṭalī'ah, 1992), pp. 62-3

<sup>100</sup> See Baron (1994), p. 41 quoted above. See also Badran and Cooke (1990), p. xx and al-Sa'īd's lecture in Fernea and Bezirgan (1988), pp. 375, 379. It is worth mentioning that apart from the Egyptian women's case, there is a lack of recorded evidences about the effects of the bitterness of the British and French mandates on women in the Mashriq earlier in the twentieth century. It might be related to the wide range of illiteracy valid at that time, especially among women, as well as the limited spaces and activities of women of that time.

determine Arab attitudes to the outside world”.<sup>101</sup> This wave of frustration overwhelms the literature of this period and imposes new demands on Modern Arabic literature including women’s writings.

On the one hand, these political crises helped women in particular to clear their vision and be aware of their own position. As Cooke explains the case of Lebanese women during the civil war: “[a]s the war dragged on, and middle and upper class Beirut women found themselves increasingly alone, they began to write about their particular experiences as women, and to recognize through articulation their previous oppression and marginalization.”<sup>102</sup> So the civil war which was made and perpetuated by men helped women to realise their oppression and subordination in their patriarchal society and articulate this dissatisfying situation in literary terms; the case which can be applied to Palestinian women during the Intifada.

On the other hand, Cooke recognises the difference between women’s situation in and reflection of ‘anticolonial’ and ‘postcolonial’ wars. She argues that Algerian and Palestinian women in Israel in the 1950s-60s participated in the fight to liberate the land with almost total negligence to social change in favour of political goals. This was not the case of Iraqi, Lebanese, and Palestinian women in the 1970s and 1980s who set social change as their priority. These women writers

have seen that victory in the political sphere has no necessary connection with societal change; political victory brings few if any advantages to the lives of the people. [They became aware] that if political victory is to have any meaning at all, it must entail social transformation. Armed with this awareness, these women improvise ways of participating that are unlike those of their male counterparts, ways that do not negate their

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<sup>101</sup> Badāwī, ‘The Background’, p. 20.

<sup>102</sup> Cooke (1988), p. 11.

identities as women. Their resistance becomes self-consciously feminine. They insist on this difference in activism while emphasizing the commonality of the goal. These women write out of their own experiences, transforming the meanings others have traditionally attached to what they have done and to who they are, demanding recognition at the time of participation. They write to express their own needs and link these with the needs of their country, which is both a political entity and a community of precious individuals.<sup>103</sup>

Thus, Cooke sums up the transformation in women's roles in national struggle from negligence to acknowledging and demanding recognition of their feminist rights and social change. This transformation is articulated in the writings of the *avant-gardes* who, unlike their predecessors, expand their concerns to include issues related to their societies.

Moreover, these political conditions bring the categorisation of thematic concerns into another subdivision of regional subject matters. Novelists in the Levant take up the subject of the long-drawn-out Palestinian-Israeli conflict as one of the major themes of their writings. This fact reflects their regional solidarity which is part of the "constant pursuit of the ideal of Arab unity [which is] prompted by the awareness of Israeli threat",<sup>104</sup>. Later, this theme is expanded to include the Lebanese civil war as another regional concern of Levantine writers. Such facts reinforce the importance of categorising this literature as Levantine which in itself includes literature by women.

It is noteworthy that the sixties and seventies witnessed wider publications of women's feminist literature<sup>105</sup> which reflected simultaneously the national crises in Palestine and Lebanon. Though these crises hinder the progress of Arabs generally

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<sup>103</sup> Cooke (1996), p. 11.

<sup>104</sup> Badāwī, 'The Background', p. 14.

<sup>105</sup> See Badran and Cooke (1990), p. xxxiii.

including Arab feminist movement, they provide this movement with dynamism and broaden its scope through the ensued social and political changes and the need to deal with such changes. Events like the defeat of 1967 awaken the Arab consciousness towards a collective Arab nationalism. *Avant-garde* writers are part of this awakening which is articulated in the shift of their feminist interests from the usual description of “women’s lives as a constant struggle to find a space of their own [to] a bolder literary attack on patriarchal institutions and traditions”.<sup>106</sup> This wave has developed quickly to give their feminist struggle further dimensions by including national struggle. In this sense, women’s liberation is set parallel to nation liberation. Political conflicts such as the Lebanese civil strife and the Palestinian Intifada offer women the opportunity to break their daily routine and express themselves through writing and publishing in, and for, an unravelled society with relinquished patriarchal ascendancy. Thus, these political conflicts provide the *avant-gardes* with a momentum to broaden their thematic concerns beyond traditional *de jure* feminist claims. From here emerges the link between nationalism and feminism in modern feminist Middle Eastern literature: the first demolishes the partitions and limitations of the second.

In this context, the *avant-garde* literature distinguishes itself from the literature of the previous generations as well as male literature by broadening its subject matter to include other critical human and national issues which they tackle deeply. While previous generations of women writers deal with themes like isolation and alienation subjectively, the *avant-gardes* express a maturer attitude towards their subject matters. Lebanese and Palestinian women writers, for example, broaden the theme of alienation

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. xxxiv.

into a reflection of their experience of exile enhancing by this the quality of women's output. Almost every woman writer among the *avant-gardes*—whether decides to run away from homeland to escape the vicious fight or chooses to stay and participate in the actual fight—tackles the theme of exile “whether internal or external”.<sup>107</sup> Thus they broaden the individual ‘exile of solitude’<sup>108</sup> into a more collective one which includes external exile (for national causes mainly).

Kilpatrick labels these different attitudes when she distinguishes two approaches in the work of Arab women writers: “One is inspired by concern for the individual and society as a whole and treats the position of women as one of a number of important themes, while the other is a product of a particular concentration on the oppression of women in Arab society which pretty well excludes any other themes.”<sup>109</sup> On the one hand, the first approach can be applied to the *avant-gardes* who attempt to combine their feminist concerns with wider social and political demands, as I have just argued. On the other hand, the feminist concerns of *the pioneers* can be observed in light of the second approach. Besides the initial calls for women's rights to education and work,<sup>110</sup> the ‘female literary culture’ launched by *the pioneers* was mainly concerned with women's social, health, and domestic affairs.<sup>111</sup> Bāḥithat al-Bādiyah, Fawwāz, and al-Taymūriyyah raised issues related to multiple marriage and women's seclusion by the veil. The tradition of women writers' empathy with one another which was established by *the pioneers* can be regarded as another example of this issue. As mentioned in

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<sup>107</sup> See Allen, ‘The Mature Arabic Novel’, p. 213.

<sup>108</sup> The ‘exile of solitude’ is one of the main themes of Taymūriyyah's feminist concerns.

<sup>109</sup> Kilpatrick, ‘Women and Literature’, p. 82.

<sup>110</sup> See Bāḥithat al-Bādiyah, ‘A Lecture in the Club of the Umma Party 1909’, pp. 229-32, 237.

<sup>111</sup> See Baron (1994), pp. 51-3. Baron refers to Labībah Hāshim's series of lectures on child rearing among other examples on this issue.

Chapter One, this tradition was mainly concerned with women such as Fawwāz's encyclopaedia of biographies, *Pearls Scattered*.

*The pioneers'* feminist attempts, in which they focused mainly on women and their oppression, were considered a reaction against their patriarchal societies for the inferior subject positions they were condemned to inhabit as women. They embarked upon questioning the boundaries of the limited spaces assigned to them and the trivial interests women have to engage in and profess in order to satisfy the patriarchs. Consequently, in early Arab feminist debates, the focus on women's issues can be understood within Kandiyoti's two phases of 'combating androcentric bias' and 'accounting for the subordination of women'. Therefore, the feminist contribution of *the pioneers* did not transcend the focus on the subordination of Arab women to include any other pivotal social or political issues.

In this sense, the feminism of *the pioneers* can be considered 'individualist feminism'. In her study of Western feminism, especially the French and Anglo-American varieties, Offen distinguishes between 'relational feminism' and 'individualist feminism'. According to Offen

arguments in the relational feminist tradition proposed a gender-based but egalitarian vision of social organization. They featured the primacy of a companionate, non-hierarchical, male-female couple as the basic unit of society, whereas individualist arguments posited the individual, irrespective of sex or gender, as the basic unit. Relational feminism emphasized women's rights as women (defined principally by their childbearing and/or nurturing capacities) in relation to men. It insisted on women's distinctive contributions in these roles to the broader society . . . By contrast, the individualist feminist tradition of argumentation emphasized more abstract concepts of individual human rights and celebrated the quest for personal independence (or autonomy) in all aspects of life, while downplaying, deprecating, or dismissing as insignificant all socially defined roles and minimizing discussion of sex-

linked qualities or contributions, including childbearing and its attendant responsibilities.<sup>112</sup>

Therefore, the gender-based attitude of relational feminism is ‘egalitarian’ and claims women’s rights in respect to their biological responsibilities such as motherhood. This indicates women’s emancipation within their immediate and expanded families while pertaining to general social unity and liberty. On the other hand, individualist feminism pays more attention to women’s emancipation as individuals, relegating the importance of the egalitarian gender-based attitude and thus minimising its broader social aspect.

Offen’s analysis can be applied to Arab feminism with some incidental reflections. I consider the feminism of *the pioneers* ‘individualist’ in the sense that they set women’s freedom prior to demands for general social freedom. Although the calls for women’s liberation were initially claimed as a necessity for social reform as argued above, *the pioneers*’ focus on ‘women’, especially upper-class, as separate from the rest of society emphasises the ‘individualism’ of their feminism. For instance, the early concerns of women’s rights to education, work, and more access to public spaces did not include women from lower classes; therefore, the benefits of such demands could not have a direct impact on the whole society. In short, it can be regarded merely as an expression of injustice based on gender differentiation. This Arab individualist feminism, like American individualist feminism, seems to be based on desperate efforts to imitate the dominant male figure in their societies. These initial individualist demands create what is called “*masculinisme féminin*”.<sup>113</sup> Though Arab feminist individualists did not call for ultimate independence for single women—opposite to the

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<sup>112</sup> Offen, ‘Defining Feminism’, pp. 135-6.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 137.

“emergence of a large group of emancipated single women during the nineteenth century”<sup>114</sup> in England and the United States—they aimed to break the grip of external social-patriarchal restrictions which subsequently affect their individual lives as upper-class women.

Although, later in the nineteenth century, the French came to view individualist feminism as “socially destructive”<sup>115</sup>, it is for this individualist concerns that the feminist movement in the Mashriq came to existence. May Ziyādah in her article about Wardah al-Yāzījī emphasises this point. She states:

I have only time to indicate in passing my esteem of what women from earlier generations have done to open up the way for us. I say: “Open up the way”, even though all they did was to put up a signpost at the threshold [*sic*] of unknown territories. However, this signpost has value and use, especially when we remember when it was put up. It was left to us to uncover and register in existence the nature of the eastern [*sic*] woman, and to struggle thereafter to make sure that we help it to grow and that we polish it so that it appears the way it is in essence as a work of art, as a resource and as a treasure.<sup>116</sup>

The individualist feminism of *the pioneers*, although limited, established the necessary ‘signposts’ of ‘unknown territories’ for the following generations to explore. Therefore, despite the individualism of *the pioneers’* feminism as identified in this thesis, it did originate Arab feminism.

On the one hand, Ziyādah’s statement sums up the accomplishments of *the pioneers* and sets up the duties and potentials of her generation. However, the *inward-looking* generation did not bring much improvement to the achievements of their

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 137.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p. 146.

<sup>116</sup> Ziyādah, ‘Warda al-Yāzījī 1924’, p. 240.



predecessors. According to Cooke, women writers from the *inward-looking* generation “were writing in isolation from the mainstream literary tradition and from each other. As women writers, they did not form a unit that might be retrospectively called a feminine voice.”<sup>117</sup> The time of the *inward-looking* generation was a transitional time in the movement of Arab feminism. Thus it becomes the responsibility of the *avant-gardes* to retrieve the pioneers’ calls and broaden it.

On the other hand, Ziyādah’s argument proves Cooke to be wrong in her consideration of the *avant-gardes* as “orphans who had no parents and who belonged to no one.”<sup>118</sup> Although it can be true that they were writing in the ‘wilderness’, they were following (and improving) an already existing path, that is, individualist Arab feminism. The ‘wilderness’ represents the confused turbulent political and social timing of the *avant-gardes*’ activism. However, it is within this timing of late twentieth century that more women writers joined the literary scene as a result of education being introduced to more Arab women, accomplishing by this one of *the pioneers*’ initial demands.

As mentioned above, the *avant-gardes*, in their literature, adopt Kilpatrick’s first approach, that is, the concern for the individual as well as society as a whole and dealing with women’s oppression as one of other social, cultural, and political oppressions. By combining feminist issues with social and nationalist ones to widen their concern to include the society as a whole, the *avant-gardes* depart away from the mere concentration on the oppression of women as individuals. Thus they implement relational feminism in the sense that they resume what their antecedents have already started by calling for the rights of education and work outside the household. Yet they

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<sup>117</sup> Cooke, ‘Arab Women Writers’, p. 449.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p. 459.

took into consideration that the oppression of Arab women is part of a wider suppression which includes the Arab world generally and the Levant specifically. This attitude can be seen as a result of the political crises mentioned above which increase the demand of addressing women's issues and political issues simultaneously. Al-Sammān illustrates this point when in a 1977 interview she emphasises the importance of considering Arab women's liberation as an essential part of the general comprehensive revolution since "it is impossible to liberate the body alone or the woman alone. The actual complete revolution is the only method to attain emancipation for everybody."<sup>119</sup>

With such an approach, the *avant-gardes* avoid the flaw of individualist feminism which blinds us to "arguments put forth today by women and men in economically less-privileged countries [like Arab countries], where women's aspirations to self-sovereignty are often subordinated to pressing short-term political and socioeconomic necessities."<sup>120</sup> Thus a discussion of feminism in relation to other social, political, and economic realities becomes necessary to avoid the limitations of *the pioneers'* debates.

Furthermore, according to Offen "relational feminism combined a case for moral equality of women and men with an explicit acknowledgement of differences in women's and men's sexual functions in society (or . . . the "difference difference makes")."<sup>121</sup> Offen's interpretation is applicable to the feminism of the *avant-gardes*

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<sup>119</sup> Al-Sammān, *The Tribe* (1990), p. 55. This is one of the essential messages of her collection of short stories *Raḥīl al-Marāfi' al-Qadīmah* (*Departure of the Ancient Ports*), (Bayrūt: Manshūrāt Ghādah al-Sammān, 1992; 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1973).

<sup>120</sup> Offen, 'Defining Feminism', p. 138.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

which tries to assert social norms where both men and women can cooperate together with as less discrimination based on physiological differentiation as possible. This attitude is taken up by both al-Sammān and Khalīfah as will be further investigated in the following chapters.

The harsh political realities of *avant-garde* Arab feminists, especially Levantines, make the challenge even harder. They embark upon this project, however, by establishing a feminist literature which reveals the complexity of their struggle with an occasional attempt to suggest solutions. Therefore, *avant-garde* Arab feminists “possessed a ‘feminist consciousness’: they viewed women’s collective situation in the culture as unjust, they attributed it to social and political institutions established by men, and they believed that it could be changed by protest and political action.”<sup>122</sup>

Accordingly, the *avant-gardes* succeed in revealing the feminism of women’s literature in the second half of the twentieth century; it can be seen as the culmination of women’s efforts since almost a century ago. Jayyūsī acknowledges this tradition; she states

These women [writers] had to fight a silent but determined battle on many fronts; . . . they took time out . . . trying to forge a tradition of feminine and often feminist literature independent of men. Far from resorting to a romantic, sentimental fiction of love and emotional escape, they moved straight to problematic issues, probing the questions most pertinent to their society and abstaining, spontaneously I think, from writing for the sake of amusement or diversion, or to give momentary solace to the repressed sexual desires of their audience. . . . Rather, they addressed, with candor, alacrity, and sometimes great audacity, the

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., p. 141.

serious, perturbing, and vital problems that afflicted their gender and their lives.<sup>123</sup>

Needless to say, the *avant-gardes*, including al-Sammān and Khalīfah, contribute to this feminist tradition by adopting this approach in their literature.

However, the multiple concerns of relational feminism make it more complex than individualist feminism. *Avant-garde* feminism suffers from this complication while combining feminist claims with nationalist ones. In such a case, female liberation becomes part of a general call for land liberation thus classifying women's rights within larger national rights which leads to a recognised delay in liberating Arab women. In the literary works of some of the *inward-looking* writers and *Avant-gardes* one can recognise a general claim for "the liberation of the woman and of the nation . . . to go hand in hand."<sup>124</sup> Yet national liberation has always been a priority which is supposed to bring along other kinds of liberations including women's. Abu-Lughod illustrates this point: "the sphere of women was localized as a sphere of backwardness to be reformed, regenerated, and uplifted for the benefit of the nation."<sup>125</sup> However, this has not been put into practice in the case of Arab nations. The awareness of the aftermath of the Algerian revolution, that is, the disavowal of Algerian women's efforts towards the revolution and their rights after independence, warn other Arab feminists against further marginalisation of the struggle for Arab women's emancipation.<sup>126</sup> Thus the mission of Palestinian and Lebanese women writers becomes more challenging in order to create a balance: to remain feminists whilst still fighting for land liberation. Both al-Sammān

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<sup>123</sup> Jayyūsī, 'Modernist Arab Women Writers', pp. 4-5.

<sup>124</sup> Cooke, 'Arab Women Writers', p. 451.

<sup>125</sup> Quoted in Abu-Lughod, 'Feminist Longings', p. 10.

<sup>126</sup> See Badran and Cooke (1990), pp. xxvi-xxvii.

and Khalīfah are prominent examples of the *avant-gardes* who advocate in their literary works feminist and nationalist causes simultaneously, as the following chapters will illustrate.

One of the other dangers which threaten Arab feminist endeavours while involved in national struggle is the exceptional and temporary transformation of women's roles within and outside their assigned social status. In the same way that women writers seize the chance of political conflict to usher in literary professions, other women take this opportunity to participate in the actual national fight as a challenge to their prescribed social roles as wives and mothers. Thus the 'exceptional' times of national conflict provide women with roles 'exceptional' in the sense that it defies their gendered roles temporarily. Such apparent gains will be often reversed during times of peace and institutionalisation sending women back to their gendered spaces and roles, that is, to almost the start point. Though their new acquired awareness of their rights and abilities make the return to the previous status not easy, it will provide them with the necessary stimulus to resume their feminist demands.

This fact explains how the basic claims of education and gender differentiation launched by *the pioneers* are still valid in different parts of the Arab world. Arab feminism, which emerged in Egypt with Egyptian women's participation in the 1919 demonstrations, did not grant women their demands completely. However, the partial achievements of women's education and work led the *inward-looking* generation to address other issues related to women's sexual oppression. By the time of the *avant-gardes* none of these feminist requests were totally accomplished. Besides, the political and socio-economic situation of the sixties and seventies delayed the progressive

movement in the Arab world. Therefore, the *avant-gardes* has to raise the same initial issues of education, work, and sexual liberation and add to it new demands of women's political rights while considering the larger social and cultural milieu.

According to this argument, this thesis identifies what we might call the *vicious cycle mode* of Arab feminism. In her study Jayyūsī recognises this concept; she states

It is tragic that these [liberal] arguments of the 1920s are still relevant today, and are not simply part of a foregone era. . . . Modern Arabs might have expected to see this argument conclusively resolved long since, particularly as the Arab world passed through a much more liberal period during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. However, since the mid-1970s, the argument has been resumed and threatens to undo the progress achieved by so many women and men in modern times.<sup>127</sup>

Kandiyoti emphasises this muting and submerging of early Arab feminist calls—because of social restrictions and political causes—only to be resumed in the 1980s.<sup>128</sup> However, the re-emerging of feminist calls in the Levant is stimulated by nationalist claims since it takes place in the same period which witnesses major political changes in different Arab countries especially Lebanon and Palestine. Badran asserts that the “institutionalization of Arab feminism emerged from a coalescence in solidarity around a nationalist cause, the Palestine cause.”<sup>129</sup> While Kandiyoti argues that “nationalism was the leading idiom through which issues pertaining to women's position in society were articulated”<sup>130</sup>, she highlights the fact that “[f]eminism is not autonomous, but

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<sup>127</sup> Jayyūsī, ‘Modernist Arab Women Writers’, p. 14.

<sup>128</sup> Kandiyoti, ‘Contemporary Feminist Scholarship’, p. 10. The same argument has been emphasised by Badran and Cooke, p. xxviii.

<sup>129</sup> Badran (1995), p. 223.

<sup>130</sup> Kandiyoti, ‘Contemporary Feminist Scholarship’, p. 8.

bound to the signifying network of the national context which produces it.”<sup>131</sup> This dependency clarifies, to a certain extent, the *vicious cycle mode* of Arab feminism: the resilient feminist debates ensued from feminist connection to and reliance on the unstable political conditions in the region.

However, this dependency and interrelationship between feminism and nationalism has some positive effects on Arab feminism. It is within these *avant-gardes* that Arab women writers start forming units and groups to represent them. This period witnesses the emergence of what Cooke identifies as ‘the Beirut Decentrists’ which includes *avant-garde* authors such as al-Sammān, al-Shaykh, Naṣrallāh, and ‘Usayrān.<sup>132</sup> Cooke defines them as “a group of women writers who have shared Beirut as their home and the war as their experience.”<sup>133</sup> They have been decentred both physically and intellectually which is reflected in their literature on the war. This group includes women who are arabophone, francophone, and anglophone.<sup>134</sup> What brings the Beirut Decentrists together is the same interest in feminist issues during the national crisis of the Lebanese civil war. Their literature is different from that of their contemporary male writers: the Beirut Decentrists did not describe the Lebanese civil war as political, economic, or religious; rather their

fiction rejects such self-deceiving abstractions and by attempting to confront reality reflects it. . . . Only women’s literature which focuses on the dailiness of survival can capture and develop the subtleness of an

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<sup>131</sup> Deniz Kandiyoti, ‘Identity and its Discontents: Women and the Nation’, in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (Eds.), *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 380.

<sup>132</sup> See Cooke (1988), p. 5.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., p. 3. The name by itself suggests the territorialism of their affiliation. However, even within this ‘territorial feminist unit’ there are voices which cross this territorialism into wider collectivity. Laylā ‘Usayrān is a good example of this case.

<sup>134</sup> See Cooke, ‘Arab Women Writers’, p. 454.

irrationality that becomes categorized as madness if it is presented in black and white. Only feminine literature documents details that seem too trivial and personal to note.<sup>135</sup>

By such detailed description, the Beirut Decentrists criticised a society where “the weak and helpless had been left to struggle alone. Consciousness of this fact brought into focus another: the weak and helpless had survived and had through survival become strong and independent.”<sup>136</sup> Thus the debate of the Beirut Decentrists illustrates how the Lebanese civil war shifts Lebanese women from the weak, helpless, and indifferent position they were forced to assume in their pre-war patriarchal society, into a stronger reality where they have to struggle to survive. This is the kind of debates that Cooke realises in her studies of the war-writings of the Beirut Decentrists; she explores “how literature which is not promoted as feminist, nonetheless portrays and even accelerates feminist transformations.”<sup>137</sup> In this sense, the harshness of the fight forces all social castes to have one primary concern, that is, survival. In the context of this thesis, the works of both al-Sammān and Khalīfah will be examined against the backdrop of this kind of stimulation which national struggle brings to feminist struggle in the Middle East.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that Cooke’s argument of the Beirut Decentrists disregards the writings of Palestinian women in Lebanon on the Lebanese civil war and the experience of Palestinian refugees during that war, most importantly during the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Cooke asserts that “Palestinian activists within Lebanon were also marginal to the civil war. Their commitment to the Palestinian cause

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<sup>135</sup> Cooke (1988), p. 26.

<sup>136</sup> Cooke, ‘Arab Women Writers’, p. 455.

<sup>137</sup> Badran and Cooke (1990), p. xviii.



blinded them to the war's real nature. They could only view it as a logical extension of the Palestinian struggle."<sup>138</sup> Cooke's perspective is questionable for it neglects the aforementioned shared history of Palestinian and Lebanese national struggle<sup>139</sup>; that is, the experience of Palestinian exiles in Lebanon is integral to the Lebanese civil war. This fact is reflected in the writings of Palestinian authors such as Liyānah Badr. Despite the complexities of their situation, the existence of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and the massacres that were perpetrated against them by Lebanese Christian militia (Tall al-Za'tar in 1976 and Ṣabrā and Shatīlā in 1982) re-enforced the territorialism of Lebanese nationalism versus Palestinian transnationalism. Cooke's marginalisation of this aspect in the writings of women on the Lebanese civil war, despite its humanitarian element, seems to ignore the realities of the Palestinian experience in Lebanon, especially that of women and children.<sup>140</sup> Although the literary contribution of Palestinian women in Lebanon is essential to the study of women's writings on the Lebanese civil war, the aim of this dissertation is to examine literary trends in women's writings *within* the territories of the nation in crisis. My choice of al-Sammān (a Syrian national by birth) and Khalīfah as the main focus of this dissertation is not motivated by concerns for their nationalities/citizenships. It is rather based on their choice of existentialism and realism and their advancing of new narrative styles through which they concoct a series of novels that can be read separately while still forming a coherent series, a novelty that has not been deliberately attempted by other contemporary writers of theirs.

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<sup>138</sup> Cooke (1988), p. 23.

<sup>139</sup> See pp. 32-33.

<sup>140</sup> See Saliba, 'A Country Beyond Reach', p. 139.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter examines the conceptualisation of Arab feminism and the development of literary feminist discourse and thematic dynamism in the writings of the three generations of Arab women writers in the Mashriq. I provide in the first section brief conceptualisation of Arab feminism through a discussion of the terminology used so far in describing Arab women's feminist activities and concerns. I also adopt Offen's concept of feminism, as an ideology and movement, which will be implemented in this thesis. In the second subdivision, I present the factors that affect the rise and development of feminist literary critique in the Mashriq. This further explores the link between feminist and nationalist claims in the writings of Arab women, especially Levantine. In the third section, I highlight this interrelationship by tracing the development of thematic concerns in the writings of contemporary Arab women authors and identify this dynamism as the *vicious cycle mode*.

Within this *vicious cycle mode* we can explore the thematic movement of Arab feminists in the aforementioned three generations. *The pioneers* initiate de jure rights of education and work and raised the awareness of gender differentiation. Their calls to recognise women's subordination were, however, sidelined for social reform and national causes. Moreover, their feminist concerns focus on women and ignores the society as a whole. Therefore, I consider in the context of this thesis the feminism of *the pioneers* individualist feminism. The *inward-looking* generation expresses a wave of narcissism and romanticism which lead to almost a literary sexual revolution which was overlooked in favour of social transformation through Marxism and modernisation. It is

only in the *avant-garde* literature that women writers express a maturer management of their claims. They combine women's basic rights with more recognition of women's sensuality and sexuality adding to it broader yet essential national concerns. Hence, their feminism can be seen as relational feminism since it considers other cultural, social, and national issues besides women's affairs.

It is within the works of the *avant-gardes* that the *vicious cycle mode* is identified because of the repetition of initial feminist claims, that is, the feminist demands of the earlier generations of women writers are still valid in the works of the *avant-gardes*. Hence Arab feminist critique can be seen as going time and again in the *vicious cycle mode* with few acknowledged achievements outside this cycle. Accordingly, I propose a new understanding of Arab feminism as going beyond the 'waves' of Western feminist thoughts, recognise the circular nature of Arab feminism since its rise to the present, and identify the social, political, and socio-economic harsh realities of the modern Middle East as the causes of this *vicious cycle mode*. However, the *avant-gardes* in their most recent works find a way to break this *vicious cycle mode* and avoid the mistakes of their predecessors to further define and claim the urgent demands of Arab women while introducing new literary styles. This will be explored more deliberately in the following chapters which will present an analysis of the literary works of two of the *avant-garde* writers: al-Sammān and Khalīfah.

## **PART TWO**

### **A CRY FOR FREEDOM**

The second part of this thesis consists of three chapters that focus on al-Sammān as an *avant-garde* writer and her contribution to the repertoire of contemporary Arab women's writings. It presents al-Sammān's novels under study as exceptional in the way she genuinely introduces a new understanding of literary existentialism while exploring nationalist and feminist issues, thus creating what I call *existentialist Arab feminism* and *existentialist nationalism*. In addition to introducing these new literary techniques, al-Sammān pioneers the presentation of new narrative style where she fashions a series of novels which can be read separately while still forming a sequel, in this case a quartet. Through this al-Sammān is considered in the context of this thesis to break through the above-mentioned *vicious cycle mode* of contemporary women writers in the Mashriq.



## CHAPTER THREE

### AL-SAMMĀN'S QUARTET: FROM ANTICIPATION TO PERPETUATION

In order to illustrate al-Sammān's innovative literary style, it is necessary to start with a close analysis of those novels examined in the thesis: *Bayrūt '75* (*Beirut '75*; 1975), *Kawābīs Bayrūt* (*Beirut Nightmares*; 1976), *Laylat al-Milyār* (*The Night of the First Billion*; 1986), and *Sahrah Tanakuriyyah li-l-Mawtā* (*Masquerade for the Dead*; 2003).<sup>1</sup> This analysis proposes a new conception of these four novels as a quartet. It also provides the necessary material for the following chapters which explore al-Sammān's modes of literary existentialism.

The first three novels have been considered a trilogy by previous scholars such as Pauline Homsy Vinson.<sup>2</sup> Yet until now the fourth work has not been studied in relation to this trilogy. Thus, through recounting the incidents of these novels the chapter will read these four works as a quartet, by highlighting the links between themes and characters in the four novels. It will also display how al-Sammān's quartet evolves from anticipating the war in *Beirut '75* into depicting the war in *Nightmares*

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<sup>1</sup> The publication dates mentioned here are the dates of the first editions of these novels. In the context of this thesis, I refer to the more recent editions cited in the bibliography. The first three novels in this quartet have been translated into English. Hence from now on, all references will be made to the English editions of these novels unless otherwise mentioned. As for *Sahrah Tanakuriyyah li-l-Mawtā*, translation of the title and all quotations from this novel is mine. From now on I will also refer to these novels by their abbreviated English titles. Transliteration of characters' names is mine.

<sup>2</sup> See Pauline Homsy Vinson, 'Ghada Samman: A Writer of Many Layers', *Al Jaded Magazine*, Vol. 8, no. 39 (Spring, 2002), p. 1.

and finally ends with excessive description of the perpetuation of the causes of the war in the last two novels. These analyses will form the basis for the exploration of literary existentialist features in al-Sammān's works exemplified by these four novels. I find it necessary, however, to initiate the argument of this chapter with a brief account of one of the most prominent discussions on women's writings of the Lebanese civil war; that is, Miriam Cooke's concept of the Beirut Decentrists which I will draw on in the analysis of al-Sammān's quartet.

### **A BEIRUT DECENTRIST**

Miriam Cooke in *War's Other Voices: Women Writers on the Lebanese Civil War*, one of the groundbreaking works on women and the Lebanese civil war, explores the transformation of the roles of women writers in Lebanon from passive readers of, and witnesses to, war stories to active writers and hence participants in the war. This transformation is best illustrated in the articulation of the concept of 'responsibility' that is relentlessly asserted by these women writers, since responsibility "must be located squarely within oneself, for it is in oneself that one must trust, and through oneself survive. Responsibility is not guilt or recrimination, but rather a creative concern to assure collective survival and consciousness."<sup>3</sup> These women choose to take action and to write to express their devotion to their communities. Moreover, they choose to illustrate this responsible action by creating female characters who are committed to the national cause. Cooke groups Arab women writers who express their responsibility and

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<sup>3</sup> Cooke (1988), p. 102.

reflect their experience of the war in Beirut from the 'inside margin' under the title the Beirut Decentrists with Ghādah al-Sammān being the most famous of these Beirut Decentrists.<sup>4</sup>

Cooke's argument revolves around these women's refusal to endorse the war as an ideology;<sup>5</sup> rather they create a style to reflect the war by emphasising the continuation of life through detailed descriptions of actual events and human reactions, paying special attention to how women perceive the war and participate in the fight. This methodology of recounting the war generates what Cooke identifies as a feminist consciousness that crystallises with the loosening of socially repressive doctrines during times of war. Al-Sammān, like the rest of the Beirut Decentrists, expresses this kind of feminist consciousness in her chronicling of the Lebanese civil war; a consciousness that is based on the denunciation of gender discrimination and the need to struggle for social transformation. This feminist consciousness, therefore, emphasises women's important roles in their community which have previously been silenced by traditional social conditions. These women writers assert that what "women did in this war mattered. It mattered to them, but it mattered also to Lebanon and to Lebanese everywhere in the world, because they were dealing with the war as a totality that infringed upon every aspect of life."<sup>6</sup> The utilisation of this feminist consciousness to express issues related to the war and national struggle re-enforces the inseparable link between nationalist and feminist causes in the writings of al-Sammān as a Beirut Decentrist.

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<sup>4</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 3. Cooke's literal definition of this title is discussed above in Chapter Two, pp. 107-08.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.



Al-Sammān's quartet traces the development of women's involvement in the war—and accordingly their participation in their communities' survival—during different phases of the Lebanese civil war. For example, the passivity of Yasmīnah in pre-war Beirut is replaced with the revolutionary attitude of the anonymous protagonist in *Nightmares* and her friend Maryam during the war, this is followed by the defeat of some revolutionary women such as Dunya and Layla after the Israeli invasion of 1982, only to conclude with Samīrah, the assertive revolutionary feminist writer in the post-war era.<sup>7</sup> With such instances, al-Sammān—as a Beirut Decentrist—conveys a straightforward aspiration to avoid repeating the experience of Algerian women after independence and the non-recognition of their participation in war. For Cooke, the Beirut Decentrists aim to reveal women's participation in the Lebanese war by registering it in history through the act of writing.

One of the main goals of this thesis is to illustrate how al-Sammān exemplifies this aspiration of the Beirut Decentrists by re-enforcing the inseparable interrelationship between feminist and nationalist causes in Lebanon through the implementation of new literary techniques, that is, literary existentialism. Al-Sammān's choice of literary existentialism is exceptionally relevant to the reflection of the war as a non-ideological struggle but by displacing attention onto questions of emotional and psychological import. The following recounting of al-Sammān's four novels will further illustrate the implementation of the Beirut Decentrists' feminist consciousness and the concept of responsibility in depicting the human condition during the national crisis in Lebanon.

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<sup>7</sup> The development of these feminist and nationalist examples will be further illustrated in Chapter Five.

## AL-SAMMĀN'S QUARTET

The central theme in these four literary works is the Lebanese civil war. In *Beirut '75* al-Sammān predicts the civil strife in Lebanon before its eruption. During the first year of the war, she wrote her second novel *Nightmares* describing the ferocity of the war in Lebanon. *The First Billion* is set during the Israeli invasion of Beirut in 1982; it tackles some of the consequences of the first phase of the civil war, especially for those who fled to Europe. Finally *Masquerade* depicts the aftermath of the civil war. The writer returns to Beirut and portrays the war's repercussions and the continuing human suffering in Lebanon, even though the actual civil war had been over for almost ten years by the time this novel was written and published. Therefore, the narrative of these four novels progresses from anticipation, to depiction, and finally reflection of the perpetuation of the causes of the war in the post-war period.

In these four novels, al-Sammān tackles, against the backdrop of the Lebanese civil war, critical issues related to Arab society such as class discrimination, gender discrimination, injustice and, most importantly, freedom. In this sense, she demonstrates a strong concern for nationalist issues alongside feminist ones. This provocative combination of these two pivotal concerns is delivered to the reader in an existentialist mode, as will be examined in the following chapters.

- **BEIRUT '75**

This quartet starts with *Beirut '75* which is the first full-length novel written by al-Sammān. It was published for the first time in March 1975, a few weeks before the

outbreak of the Lebanese civil war on 13 April 1975. The novel is considered a prophetic work, predicting the civil strife in Lebanon through its powerful portrayal of the social, political, religious, and economic background of the inhabitants of the capital city, Beirut, where the strife started before spreading out to other parts of Lebanon. In *Beirut '75*, al-Sammān depicts Lebanese society from within the lower class and poor inhabitants of Beirut—the ‘inside margin’ as Cooke puts it—contrary to her previous literary experiences of portraying the bourgeois class.<sup>8</sup>

In this work, al-Sammān presents sexuality and class distinctions as the two main causes of the Lebanese civil war. Yet she also addresses the subsidiary reasons, deriving from these, such as “discrimination, the sexual oppression of women, [homosexuality], the concept of honour in modern Arab society, injustice, political corruption, and tribal revenge.”<sup>9</sup> This depiction has been carried out through her five distinguished main characters among which Yasmīnah is the only female character. This highlights Awwad’s argument that in *Beirut '75* “women’s issues are not an overriding concern . . . but are taken up by al-Sammān only to the extent that they impinge on the condition of society as a whole.”<sup>10</sup> In this sense, al-Sammān’s feminist approach can be considered atypical in the way she sets Arab women’s issues side by side with other important ones as the main causes of the civil strife in Lebanon without a clear inclination to highlight women’s plight as more important than the political situation as a whole. This nonconforming feminist approach of al-Sammān is admired

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<sup>8</sup> In her previous collections of short stories, especially *Raḥīl al-Marāfi’ al-Qadīmah (Departure of the Ancient Ports)*, al-Sammān concentrates more on the bourgeoisie in her attempt to highlight class related issues. An example of this point will be provided later in this chapter.

<sup>9</sup> Awwad (1983), p. 95.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 95

by other critics and scholars such as Wafīq Gharīzī and Ghālī Shukrī.<sup>11</sup> I consider this literary attitude a manifestation of al-Sammān's feminist consciousness as a Beirut Decentrist since, for the Beirut Decentrists, the writer's main goal during critical times of war is to expand beyond the portrayal of issues relevant only to women and their position in society, rather they aim at registering human suffering during the unravelling of the social structure.

The novel opens with two of the five main characters, Faraḥ and Yasmīnah, in a taxi heading from Damascus to Beirut. These two young Damascene characters share similar humble backgrounds and dreams of Beirut. Coming from relatively conservative Damascene communities, the city of Beirut represents for both of them a promise of freedom, wealth, and fame. As the taxi leaves Damascus, both of them think simultaneously to themselves: "I won't be back until I'm rich and famous!"<sup>12</sup> As for Faraḥ, he hopes that Beirut will embrace him and offer him the opportunity to be a famous artist/singer. Likewise, Yasmīnah dreams of finding a space and opportunity to express her literary talents and become a writer or a poet. In her strive for self-realisation, she wants to escape the traditional role of women oppressively imposed on her which is "inimical to freedom of expression and development."<sup>13</sup> These naïve ambitions of both Yasmīnah and Faraḥ made them easy prey to bourgeois figures who are portrayed in the novel as the dominating powers in Beirut at that time. The

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<sup>11</sup> See Wafīq Gharīzī, *Al-Jins fī 'Adab Ghada al-Sammān (Sex in the Literature of Ghada al-Sammān)*, (Bayrūt: Dār al-Ṭalī'ah, 1994), pp. 6, 7 and Ghālī Shukrī, *Ghādah al-Sammān Bila Ajniḥah (Ghādah al-Sammān without Wings)*, (Bayrūt: Dār al-Ṭalī'ah, 1990; 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1977), pp. 101-2. All references from these two books are translated by me because of the unavailability of English editions of both books.

<sup>12</sup> Ghādah al-Sammān, *Beirut '75*, Trans. Nancy N. Roberts, (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 1995), p. 5. Transliteration of characters' names are mine.

<sup>13</sup> Accad (1978), p. 94.

bourgeois Nimr exploits Yasmīnah sexually before turning her into a prostitute. Similarly, Farah ends up in the hands of Nīshān, a producer and businessman, who controls Farah's life as a payback for making him a star. When Farah and Yasmīnah meet again after having experienced the harshness of Beirut and the high price of achieving their dreams they both realise that Beirut is lovely although "from a distance".<sup>14</sup>

As the taxi enters Lebanese terrains, the other three main characters join the taxi bringing on board their worries and troubles. Each of these five characters represents at least one of the main causes which led to the civil strife in Beirut; their "stories produce a portrait of a city that is on a course of self-destruction."<sup>15</sup> Abul Mallā is a poor man who has a diseased heart. On that night, he was troubled after he had to leave his third-youngest daughter to serve in the palaces of the rich. Through his character al-Sammān illustrates poverty and class discrimination in Lebanese society. Abul Mallā, the honest pious man, struggles to convince himself to steal a small ancient statue from the archaeological excavation site where he works as a guard. The price of this statue will help him save his daughters from serving in the palaces of the aristocrats. Despite his poverty, he has been quite content with his lot in life until he had to send his third daughter to work as a maid. His shock in seeing the luxury of the place where his daughter works changes his contentment into anger and frustration:

Ever since he'd set foot in that mansion in Beirut's Hazmiyyeh district where he had left her, a thorn had grown up in his heart and had begun to relentlessly tear him to pieces. When he came away from the Hazmiyyeh

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<sup>14</sup> Al-Sammān (1995), pp. 90-1.

<sup>15</sup> Stefan G. Meyer, *The Experimental Arabic Novel: Postcolonial Literary Modernism in the Levant*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), p. 118.

neighbourhood with its luxurious mansions and returned to his own neighbourhood of tinsplate shacks, it seemed as though he were seeing the place for the first time. The walls and roofs of the houses were made of tinsplates, and in the winter, the rain dripped down from the roof of his one-roomed house onto his few shabby possessions. No running water. No windows. Just flies, poverty, children's screams and shouts, and women's reprimands, curses, and insults.<sup>16</sup>

This description of the poverty of some districts in Beirut in comparison to extremely luxurious districts within the same city, illustrates the huge gap separating the rich from the poor in Beirut and the frustration of the latter group. This kind of frustration drives Abul Mallā to steal the statue. However, he dies of a heart-attack before selling it while his older son weeps saying: “[I]t was his patient endurance of poverty that killed him!”<sup>17</sup>

The fourth character, Ṭa‘ān, the newly graduated pharmacist, appears as a terrified man. His story represents tribal revenge; Ṭa‘ān is sentenced to death by the Khardaliyyah clan in revenge for their member who had been murdered by one of Ṭa‘ān's cousins. Since the murdered member of the Khardaliyyah happens to hold a university degree, the Khardaliyyah has to kill a university-graduate member of Ṭa‘ān's clan; in this case Ṭa‘ān. Therefore, he lives in an abject state of paranoia while trying to hide from the opponent clan. He mournfully contemplates: “I died on the day they sentenced me to death to avenge a man that I didn't kill, that I had no part in killing, and whose face I've never even seen before. Yet here I am, dragging my body around for the duration of the futile days remaining to me.”<sup>18</sup> Struck by an extreme fear of being killed for revenge, Ṭa‘ān himself kills a stranger in the street when the latter tries to ask

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<sup>16</sup> Al-Sammān (1995), p. 71.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

him for directions. He realises that though the opponent tribe did not kill him literally, they managed to exact revenge from his tribe when his fear turned him into a criminal.

The fifth and the last character, Abu Muṣṭafā, is a poor fisherman in his sixties. When he joins the other riders in the taxi, his thoughts are concentrated sadly on a moneylender who is exploiting him. His struggle for a decent life represents class discrimination and injustice in Lebanese society. Every night Abu Muṣṭafā goes out fishing with the dream of catching ‘the magic lamp’ in his net. He dreams of rubbing the magic lamp three times for the genie to appear so that he can “make all three of his humble wishes: a clean house, a reasonable income, and the ability to earn enough to meet his children’s needs and to pay for treatment for his tubercular lung.”<sup>19</sup> Driven by his frustration at the exploitation of the bourgeois, and his desperation to find the genie of the magic lamp, Abu Muṣṭafā throws himself into the sea with a pack of dynamite so as to meet the genie. His suicidal death can be seen as an allegory of the helplessness of the poor in pre-war Beirut.

His son, Muṣṭafā abandons his studies and literary concerns and joins the fishermen in order to learn the trade and supports his family. On his first night at work he speculates on the situation in his interior monologue: “[t]he autumn of my lifetime is starting even before I’ve had a chance to enjoy the spring. That’s the way it is with us poor folks. We live on the sly, as if by doing so we are committing some sort of crime. We get an education on the sly. We read books on the sly. [We love on the sly.] We write poetry on the sly. And we die the same way.”<sup>20</sup> Muṣṭafā’s monologue reflects the emotional, mental, and physical suffering of young poor people in pre-war Beirut.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

When the poet in Muṣṭafā testily questions his father: “[h]aven’t you’ve [sic] ever grieved over a fish’s death and thrown it back into the water when you heard it groaning. His father answered: ‘Your groaning and that of your ten brothers and sisters – that’s all I hear.’”<sup>21</sup> The harsh realities of poor fishermen turn Muṣṭafā into a revolutionary to defend the rights of the poor. His bond to other creatures is

superseded by another bond which tied him to those who, like him and his father, were suffering members of the species of “terrestrial fish,” those lost in the cruel underside of life in Beirut, like fish that had been forced to swim in its sewer lines despite their longing for *freedom*, sunshine, and clean, fresh water. He was now preoccupied with the war against the Sakeeni and Salmouni families and others of their *class*, who were stealing what few morsels the poor had to sustain themselves straight out of their mouths.<sup>22</sup>

On the one hand, the character of Abu Muṣṭafā represents class distinction and the exploitation of the poor by the rich in pre-war Lebanese society. On the other hand, Muṣṭafā’s rejection of poverty, exploitation, and injustice cultivates the first seeds of revolutionary acts which is expected to become a fair fight against the bourgeoisie to bring justice and freedom to the poor. This kind of struggle develops in the rest of this quartet to show that the conflict which presumably erupts for justice has turned into barbaric street fights. In this sense, the character of Muṣṭafā is quite important as it appears in al-Sammān’s later works, especially *Masquerade*. As such, Muṣṭafā stands as one of the links connecting al-Sammān’s four novels to form a quartet.

Meanwhile, Nimr indulges Yasmīnah in sexual pleasures and material luxuries which were forbidden to her in Damascus. She is aware that she “loved his wealth as

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 85. Emphasis is mine.



much as she despised her poverty.”<sup>23</sup> Despite her gratitude to Nimr “because he transformed [her] from an icy tundra into a minefield”<sup>24</sup>, she realises that she becomes his mistress since he “likes to dress [her] up in expensive clothes, then take [her] out to fancy restaurants so that his friends can see [them]. . . . He also likes to humiliate [her] as evidence of his manly ‘charm’.”<sup>25</sup> When Nimr declares to her that he is getting engaged to the daughter of his father’s political rival, Yasmīnah considers it “an amusing joke that marriages in this peculiar city should be contracted on the basis of political interests or business deals with different clans.”<sup>26</sup> Driven by her frustration at Nimr’s rejection of her love and her realisation that in the midst of her addiction to his wealth and body she totally neglected her dreams, Yasmīnah decides to leave Nimr and tries to lead an honest life where she can fulfil her dreams of being a writer. However, she is killed by her brother who justifies the murder “in defense of [his] honor”.<sup>27</sup> This occurs when he realises that she can no longer provide him with money to turn a blind eye to her relationship with Nimr.

As for Farah, he is “utterly lost and alone”<sup>28</sup> upon his arrival in Beirut. He is shocked to see the huge contrast between Burj, one of the poor neighbourhoods in Beirut, and fancy districts such as al-Ḥamrah Street with its people’s indifference and extravagant lifestyle. He is even more shocked at the Lebanese indifference to the Israeli planes “breaking the sound barrier as a way of announcing their hostile presence,

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., pp. 39-40.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

and no one pays the least attention!”<sup>29</sup> Instead, some people gather around a man with a small dancing monkey which started whimpering because of the loud explosions caused by the Israeli planes. “At this, everyone burst into raucous laughter. All Farah could do was mutter to himself, ‘They’re mad – they’re absolutely mad. ...’”<sup>30</sup> It is interesting that later Farah’s rejection to the superficial materialist lifestyle of Beirut was seen by others as madness.

Farah eventually obtains the fame and success he sought in Beirut. Yet he has to pay a high price. His realisation of the indifference of the Lebanese towards the ills of their society (such as materialism and class distinction) and to the fact that he surrenders totally to Nīshān who made of him a star and a boyfriend, bring about pressures that culminate towards the end. Farah is accused of being mad and is put by Nīshān in an insane asylum. Farah finally fathoms his situation: “[Nīshān] wants me in the insane asylum not to see me healed, but to take revenge on me, to torture me. He’s the one who’s ill, though, since he’s the one who’s able to accommodate himself to this sick society. As for me, I’m healthy. That’s why I wasn’t able to fall into a state of utter, absolute madness.”<sup>31</sup> Farah’s awareness suggests that unless one is prepared to sacrifice his/her human principles and morality, he/she will be tortured by the harshness of pre-war Beirut. The novel closes with a series of Farah’s nightmares. However, Farah is the only character who manages to escape Beirut alive physically, carrying with him the

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 17

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 115.

sign at the entrance of the asylum that says ‘Hospital for the Mentally Ill’ and planting it in place of the sign ‘Beirut’ at the city entrance.<sup>32</sup>

With this hallucination, al-Sammān concludes her first novel. Her five main characters share one reality: a death which is associated with the city of Beirut<sup>33</sup>; with the figurative consideration of Farah’s and Ṭa‘ān’s experience as emotional and psychological death. The tragic end of the five characters illustrates the necessity of radical change in the Lebanese society so that people from lower classes, especially women, can survive in such a place and environment. Her prediction of the closeness of the civil war comes true after a few weeks of publishing the novel. Farah’s nightmares which conclude *Beirut ’75* are followed up by another actual work *Beirut Nightmares*.

- **BEIRUT NIGHTMARES**

While *Beirut 75* is a prediction of the Lebanese civil war, *Nightmares* depicts the severity of the civil strife in a “surrealistic and nightmarish”<sup>34</sup> narrative style. Al-Sammān started writing this second novel during the first year of the civil war in Lebanon, on the night of 13 November 1975. The novel was finished on 27 February 1976. It was first serialised in a Lebanese journal from the beginning of 1976 till August 1976. Afterwards, al-Sammān published this work as a complete novel for the first time in October 1976.

*Nightmares* reflects the war from al-Sammān’s own point of view; it is “a horror fantasy on an aspect of the war the writer had witnessed.”<sup>35</sup> It is a record of events and thoughts which cover seven days in a series of nightmares written in journal format

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<sup>32</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>33</sup> Shukrī (1990), p.103.

<sup>34</sup> See Homsī Vinson, ‘A Writer of Many Layers’, p. 2.

<sup>35</sup> Cooke (1988), p. 5.

while the writer/narrator/protagonist is trapped with her elderly neighbour, Uncle Fu'ād ('Amm Fu'ād), his son Amīn, and their male cook in a house in Beirut during the notorious Hotels Battles of October and November 1975.<sup>36</sup> The anonymous protagonist is desperate to leave the confinement of her neighbour's flat, which she shares with these three men because her own flat has been almost destroyed by a missile. Through her protagonist the author portrays what it is to be a woman under siege during the intense battles of the Lebanese civil war.

Yet *Nightmares* "is more than a simple recording of events and thoughts, as in a personal diary; it is rather the author revealing herself at the conscious and subconscious levels of her perception of the real as distinct from the imaginary."<sup>37</sup> In *Nightmares*, al-Sammān does not employ the usual techniques of presenting a narrative defined by several main characters and incidents around which the novel develops into a certain conclusion. In this sense, *Nightmares* is considered by Meyer "experimental . . . in order to heighten the effect of [the] depiction"<sup>38</sup> of the civil war. He studies al-Sammān's employment of different unconventional narrative techniques from three narrative aspects: experimental, creative, and reflective.<sup>39</sup>

The 'experimental' refers to the sections that narrate the 'daily experiences' of the writer/narrator/protagonist.<sup>40</sup> The 'reflective' is reached by reference to various 'dreams' which tackle different subjects such as love, human relationships (including relationships between the two sexes), life and death, the relationship between the pen

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>37</sup> Awwad (1983), p. 45.

<sup>38</sup> Meyer (2001), p. 118.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>40</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 122-3.

and the bullet, and the intelligentsia's role in revolution. In these 'Nightmares', a number of characters are displayed, such as Old Man Death, the radio announcer, or the Orientalist. The continuous move between the real and the imaginative in *Nightmares* creates the absurdist atmosphere of the novel.<sup>41</sup> Yet the war remains the most central theme in the novel while the narrator/protagonist is the objective writer.<sup>42</sup>

The 'creative' aspect of this unconventional narrative style is achieved by the insertion of different stories; some of them are recollections of previous narrations. In this sense, *Nightmares* can be considered a revelation of *Beirut '75*'s prophecy. In *Nightmares* Khātoun, the fortune-teller, sees in her crystal ball the corrupted 'influential bey' murdered and

his bloodied, bullet-riddled corpse flung onto the pavement. [His face] had become the faces of numerous other men. She couldn't make them out clearly and most of them she didn't recognize, although she'd seen pictures of some of them in the newspaper before. Finally she said: 'I see blood... much blood... more and more blood...' . . . the scene before her was suddenly transformed into a vast field strewn with ashes and human remains. And as the field was convulsed by a colossal earthquake, a tiny green shoot could be seen forcing its way up through the surface of the ground.<sup>43</sup>

This vision emphasises the horror of the strife and the atrocity still to come. The symbol of the 'tiny green shoot' represents the hopes of the Beirutis for the end of this vicious strife. This scene evokes a similar statement in *Beirut '75* when the fortune-teller, Fāīzah, predicts the war. In her answer to the aristocrat politician Fāḍil al-Salmounī, she

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<sup>41</sup> For more examples on this aspect see *ibid.*, pp. 125-9.

<sup>42</sup> Shukrī (1990), p. 173.

<sup>43</sup> Ghādah al-Sammān, *Beirut Nightmares*, Trans. Nancy N. Roberts, (London: Quartet Books Limited, 1997), pp. 170-1.

says: “I see much grief, and I see blood – a great deal of blood.”<sup>44</sup> Yet Khātoun’s vision/awareness struck her dumb and burned her vocal cords while Fāīzah “laughed out loud as she counted up the incredible haul she’d made.”<sup>45</sup> The scene from *Beirut ’75* is portrayed as a mere prediction and becomes more powerful in *Nightmares* as the vision occurs during the firefight. Thus al-Sammān here is not merely repetitive, rather she is building on her earlier work. Therefore, al-Sammān’s combination of these three narrative techniques marks the avant-gardism of her post-1975 writings.

Ghālī Shukrī justifies this kind of connection between al-Sammān’s two works as “prophecy in action”.<sup>46</sup> Fāīzah’s prediction in *Beirut ’75* becomes fact in *Nightmares* through Khātoun’s vision. He recognises, though briefly, another example from *Nightmares* that follows on *Beirut ’75* in this ‘prophecy in action’ strategy. The protagonist dreams of a deal between the man with the black mask and the influential man where the first buys the ‘madness powder’ from the latter. The masked man throws the powder in the well which supplies Beirut with water. The powder sets fire in the water of the well. The masked man drinks from this water and turns into an angry gorilla, as if the poison revealed his animal within, making him more animalistic than human. He becomes a glutton for blood and dashes furiously towards Beirut. “The ‘madness well’ flows to bring water to the people of Beirut. Some of them obliviously drink from its water. ...”<sup>47</sup> The scene of some of the Beirutis drinking unconsciously from the madness well illustrates the unstable situation in Beirut. This follows on the

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<sup>44</sup> Al-Sammān (1995), p. 49.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>46</sup> Shukrī (1990), p. 145.

<sup>47</sup> See Ghādah al-Sammān, *Kawābīs Bayrūt* (Bayrūt: Manshūrāt Ghādah al-Sammān, 2000; 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1976), p. 20. All references to ‘Nightmare 14’ from the original Arabic edition are translated by me. It is worth mentioning that this ‘Nightmare’ has not been translated or referred to in the 1997 translation by Nancy N. Roberts which I use for other references.

scene from *Beirut '75* of Farah planting the sign of 'Hospital for the Mentally Ill' at Beirut's entrance. Shukrī approves this use of 'madness' to justify the war. For him, the reactionary behaviour which led to the civil strife is similar to the effect of unrestrained madness.<sup>48</sup> Thus, in *Nightmares* the city's madness is not psychological—rather it lies in its deep-rooted backwardness.<sup>49</sup>

Al-Sammān sets the main story between the protagonist's house and the nearby pet-shop. She uses the pet-shop as a symbol to refer to the superficial and unjust consumer society of Beirut. The shop's "tourist façade" contains "all the consumer-age diversions" that one might find in any of the fancy areas in Beirut.<sup>50</sup> The protagonist sneaks behind this façade to discover the reality of the shop. The pets are imprisoned in cages that resemble "the graves in some paupers' cemetery. [There was] a motley group of living creatures that resembled human beings in their diversity [who] had been brought together by a cage – a prison – and misery."<sup>51</sup> The only sound these hungry drowsy pets can make is a "mournful, collective voice" that sounds like "a demonstration being staged by the ill, the wounded and the weary. [It was] a ferocious sound full of ominous threat."<sup>52</sup> This symbolism illustrates how "the owner [represents] the oppressors – the government authorities and feudalists – and the pets, the people of Beirut"<sup>53</sup> whose misery, poverty, isolation, and suffering are disguised with luxurious covers. The protagonist visits this shop before the eruption of the civil war. Throughout the novel, and as the story develops from the prediction to the onset of the war, she

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<sup>48</sup> See Shukrī (1990), p. 157.

<sup>49</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 188.

<sup>50</sup> See al-Sammān (1997), pp. 11-12.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>53</sup> Awwad (1983), p. 45.

identifies with the pets and visits the shop regularly. To her surprise the pets refuse to leave their cages when she sets them free. Later, they turn on each other instead of running away from their deadly prison. By using this symbolism “al-Sammān pierces the shell of every ill in Lebanese society, perhaps of every ill in Arab society as a whole.”<sup>54</sup>

In this way, al-Sammān in *Nightmares* openly exposes the causes of the civil war and names them as tribalism and sectarianism which culminate in religious strife. She adds to this the impulse towards revenge as a consequence of ignorance, in addition to other major factors such as poverty, class struggle, and feudalism.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, in *Nightmares*, al-Sammān continues to examine gender discrimination as one of the main causes of this national crisis and a major factor which hampers ceasefire. The protagonist/narrator articulates such thoughts in myriad ‘Nightmares’.

For instance, in ‘Nightmare 82’, she reflects on the imprisonment of the female monkey which Amīn bought right after his engagement to a university student had been called off. Amīn, who represents the aristocratic male, has imprisoned the monkey in a cage especially built for her in a far corner of the garden. Amidst the firefight, the protagonist contemplates:

Whenever I looked at her [the monkey], a vague feeling of distress came over me. The sight of a creature being robbed of its freedom has always caused me pain – whatever kind of freedom it happens to be, and even if the captive party happens to belong to some species other than my own. Of course, Amin’s monkey was in a situation not altogether different from that of some of the wives in our society. Like them, she was

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>55</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 45 see also al-Sammān (2000), pp. 51, 232. It is worth mentioning that ‘Nightmare 43’ and ‘Nightmare 142’, which includes these two reference, are not translated into English in the in the 1997 translation by Nancy N. Roberts.



basically a prisoner, though she also provided Amin with moments of enjoyment and entertainment whenever he so desired in exchange for being fed, cared for and protected from any sort of outward harm – as well as from any kind of emotional contact with other monkeys, of course!<sup>56</sup>

Similar to her reflections on the imprisoned pets in the fancy pet-shop, al-Sammān's symbolism illustrates the quest for freedom. Using the image of the imprisoned female monkey, she reflects on the situation of some Arab women and highlights the need to free them from the clutches of patriarchy. The protagonist mentions on various occasions her desire to sneak out into the garden at night to set the monkey free, then she is reminded by her brother that such act might doom the monkey to destruction either by dying of hunger or by being captured and used for entertainment. Therefore, setting the monkey free in an environment which is not prepared to accept her as a free creature will threaten her existence. It can be seen that al-Sammān suggests similar destruction for some Arab women who attempt to exercise their freedom in their restricted patriarchal societies.

Al-Sammān as a Beirut Decentrist masterfully exposes women's sense of responsibility during the war through the protagonist's attempts to leave the confinement of the house or to free the pets in the shop or the female monkey: the first implies the protagonist's responsibility towards herself; the second refers to her responsibility towards the other (with the pets representing the people of Beirut) in order to contribute to the community survival. I consider this portrayal a reflection of the necessities brought by the war and women's reaction to it, in contrast to Yasmīnah's passivity and irresponsibility towards herself and the others in pre-war Beirut.

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<sup>56</sup> Al-Sammān (1997), p. 174.

Moreover, in *Nightmares* al-Sammān sets class discrimination as one of the causes of the civil strife. The protagonist is aware of the hunger, high rates of unemployment, misery, and social injustice which lead the poor to fight out of frustration of their situation rather than out of belief in revolutionary principles. Al-Sammān emphasises that “not every fight can be seen as a revolution.”<sup>57</sup> These vicious fights are perpetuated mainly by poor, hopeless and frustrated people similar to Muṣṭafā in *Beirut '75*. This is illustrated through characters such as Shākir, the shopkeeper who sells household goods. He participates in this vicious fight when a fire caused by the fight catches the market and burns all the shops including his. Shākir tries to sell what is left of his merchandise on the street but he keeps getting robbed by an armed man, who used to be a hunter, at a checkpoint. Desperate of this situation Shākir decides to become a ‘hunter’ and sets up his own checkpoint.<sup>58</sup>

Al-Sammān deploys the characters of Muṣṭafā and Shākir to embody the Beirut Decentrists’ view of the Lebanese civil war; these women writers “while not denying the validity of the concept of revolution, declared that this war was not a revolution: it had no program to transform society. With a clear sense of their duties as individuals, women did not attempt to identify an enemy (that was likely to change almost immediately). Instead they identified those who could be touched.”<sup>59</sup> Although Muṣṭafā was chosen as one of those who ‘could be touched’ and bring the necessary transformation to their society in *Beirut '75* before the eruption of the war, the development of this character into exploitative militia leader later in the quartet can be

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<sup>57</sup> See al-Sammān (2000), p. 76.

<sup>58</sup> See al-Sammān (1997), pp. 180-5.

<sup>59</sup> Cooke (1988), p. 118.

seen as al-Sammān's articulation of her observation on the Lebanese war while it was happening as non-revolutionary strife: it was a dirty war that transformed promising revolutionary figures into militias. Similarly, Shākir becomes a fighter only to survive the ferocity of the war. Al-Sammān as a Beirut Decentrist underlines through such characters that the civil war in Lebanon was not a revolution.

Through such 'Nightmares', al-Sammān is shocked to realise that it is mostly the poor who are dying "the innocent poor alone. As for their butchers, they had fled from the city of nightmares and madness to the cabarets of Paris, London and Geneva."<sup>60</sup> Among these 'butchers' she highlights the indifferent attitude of some bourgeois women comparing it to the responsible role undertaken by women from other classes in reaction to the madness of the civil strife. On the one hand, Maryam the journalist quits her job since "the pen is powerless to confront a situation like this"<sup>61</sup>; so she takes up arms and participates in the fight. On the other hand, the protagonist overhears a phone conversation between two rich bourgeois women who are disgusted by the fight mainly because during the war it is hard to find clubs to party in and flaunt their money and designer label clothes, a situation which they see as turning their lives into 'dogs lives'. Despite the fact that for them, the war does not cause real deprivation (since they have been able to get 'Saumon fume' as usual) they nonetheless decide to leave the country for Europe.<sup>62</sup> Such examples illustrate the lack of responsibility among some upper class women who remain totally indifferent to the unravelling of their society. Hence, women's responsibility towards their communities is exposed

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<sup>60</sup> Al-Sammān (1997), p. 64.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>62</sup> Al-Sammān (2000), pp. 66-7.

through al-Sammān's unbiased feminist consciousness for she highlights the different stances taken by women from different social classes during the civil war in Lebanon.

Later, al-Sammān personifies 'Love' as a companion. In a poetic tone, she holds his absence responsible for the fierce fight. She asserts that if 'Love' were to come back to Lebanon, the war would stop and women and the poor would be humanised and set free.<sup>63</sup> On the one hand, this lamenting over the absence of love is considered by Shukrī 'praying to love' to interfere and stop the killing.<sup>64</sup> On the other hand, the Beirut Decentrists believe that love, during the war, "was a powerful weapon"<sup>65</sup>, hence I consider the personification of love as an attempt to draw the attention away from the ideology of the war to the necessity of human love as a force to stop the war.

Therefore, by using the backdrop of the Lebanese civil war, al-Sammān explores a wide range of ills within Arab societies and calls for freedom and justice for everyone especially women and the poor. Thus al-Sammān's *Nightmares* is not a simple diary of the war, as her imagination and creativity has not been limited by the feverish incidents of the strife. On the contrary, she uses the nightmarish aspect of the war to address social and political concerns while implementing a combination of experimental, reflective, and creative narrative styles.

- **THE NIGHT OF THE FIRST BILLION**

From the absurdist atmosphere of *Nightmares*, al-Sammān goes back to a regular narrative style in *The Night of the First Billion*, first published in 1986. Set in Geneva during the Israeli invasion of Beirut in 1982, the novel depicts the conflicts

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<sup>63</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 160-4. It is noteworthy that 'Nightmare 107' has not been translated or referred to in the 1997 translation by Nancy N. Roberts which I use for other references.

<sup>64</sup> See Shukrī (1990), p. 165.

<sup>65</sup> Cooke (1988), p. 127.

some Lebanese, and other Arabs as well, suffer from in their self-imposed exile. Khalīl al-Dar‘, the main character, is a middle-class intellectual who is opposed to any political affiliation which stands against freedom and equality. In his small bookshop in Beirut, he only sold books which have a noble human message, like those written by the thinker Amīr al-Nīlī, who is another revolutionary character in the novel. Khalīl finally meets Amīr in Geneva where the latter helps Khalīl to endure the hardships of his exile. The novel portrays the struggle of some middle-class Lebanese patriots, exemplified by Khalīl and Amīr, against the exploitative materialist power imposed upon them by the minority of war profiteers, exemplified by Raghīd Zahrān, a billionaire and weapon trader. In this novel, al-Sammān exposes how the same ills which led to the civil war continue to persist among Lebanese, even when the setting is far from Lebanon. This reality tragically affects the goodness of the patriots and hampers their efforts to save what has been left and reconstruct what has been damaged by the war.

The novel opens with Khalīl, his wife Kafā, and their two children rushing to the airport to leave Beirut on 7 June 1982; just three days after the Israeli invasion of Southern Lebanon and bombing of Beirut. Khalīl is forced to leave Lebanon—if he does not, he will be killed by some militia members who used to be his comrades but who have turned against him because they do not approve of his liberal principles. His wife Kafā takes charge of their lives since she is paying for their expenses now. Kafā, who comes from a bourgeois family, considers her marriage to poor Khalīl a mistake. Now she is determined to join the wealthy Arab community in Geneva, where she believes she belongs. This becomes feasible when, on the plane heading to Geneva, the

couple meet Nadīm Ghafīr, an old neighbour from Beirut who lives in Geneva and works as a personal assistant to Raghīd Zahrān.

Raghīd is introduced to the readers as a greedy man who is obsessed with wealth. He is the son of a wealthy Syrian trader whose business in late 1950s, like many feudals, was affected by Abdul Nāṣer's nationalisation.<sup>66</sup> He is portrayed as a sick man who is obsessed with gold; he hates everyone and everything around him, except gold. He enjoys humiliating others, especially poor people who work for him and enjoys his power over all surrounding him. He is aware that they have to obey and please him because of his wealth. With his materialist objectives, Raghīd is determined to prove wrong the idealism of radical thinkers like Amīr al-Nīlī.

The characters of Raghīd and Nadīm illustrate how the “war was a new opportunity for social and economic profit. The social profiteers were less successful than the economic ones.”<sup>67</sup> Al-Sammān as a Beirut Decentrist utilises such examples to demonstrate the unravelling of the Lebanese society in the aftermath of the civil war and the consequent disintegration of the individuals. The disintegration of the society not only stimulates the chances to gain social and economic profits; it also causes the

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<sup>66</sup> Gamāl ‘Abdul Nāṣer’s (Jamāl ‘Abd al-Nāsir) was the President of Egypt from 1954 until his death in 1970. He is well-known for his Arab nationalist, pan-Arabist ideology and anti-colonial foreign policy. In 1958, Syria and Egypt were merged and the United Arab Republic came into being, which, however, did not succeed. In Syria, Egyptian bureaucrats and officers were seen as acting dictatorially, and the rapidly expanded secret police harshly repressed opposition groups including the Muslim Brotherhood and the Syrian Communist Party. Meanwhile, the Syrian bourgeoisie did not gain access to Egyptian markets that it had hoped for. Discontent among the Syrian bourgeoisie and officer corps led to secessionists taking control in Damascus, and the UAR was dissolved in 1961, although Egypt continued to use the name until 1971. See J. S. F. Parker, ‘The United Arab Republic’, *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (Jan., 1962), pp. 15-28 (19-22). See also Barakat (1993), pp. 166-68. On the ideological tenets of Nasser’s nationalism see R. Hrair Dekmejian, *Egypt Under Nasir: A Study in Political Dynamics*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1971), pp. 101-8. Abdul Nāṣer’s nationalisation can be understood within this brief history in the context of *The First Billion*.

<sup>67</sup> Cooke (1988), p. 114.

“individual fragmentation” which is used by the Beirut Decentrists as “a model for reconstruction”.<sup>68</sup> In *The First Billion* Raghīd and Nadīm stand for the profiteers while Khalīl exemplifies this individual fragmentation in the way his inner conflicts are portrayed to express the dilemma the Lebanese individual faces as a result of the disintegrating of his society and the new values he has to assume in order to survive in the newly formed social structures as subsequently illustrated.

Raghīd relies heavily on the fortune-telling and so-called witchcraft of Shaykh Waṭfān, the astrologer, in all the decisions he makes. The nature of Waṭfān’s character and his sorcery add to the absurdist atmosphere of the novel especially towards the end, with the arrival of a young girl from Lebanon, Baḥriyah Zahrān. Raghīd claims she is his relative who he saved from the war in Lebanon as means of establishing his good reputation. The canicule winds which accompanied Baḥriyah’s arrival in Geneva and her presence in Raghīd’s palace are portrayed in an absurdist mode. On the one hand, her presence upsets the balance between Waṭfān and Raghīd, when the first becomes unable to practise his sorcery while Raghīd becomes less capable of practising his cruelty. On the other hand, her presence strengthens good-hearted characters like the servant, Nasīm.

The title of the novel is derived from Raghīd’s grand celebration for collecting his first billion dollars. He is planning a huge party at his golden palace to celebrate the occasion with the most famous billionaires and millionaires from around the world. The incidents of the novel are woven around these main characters with the background of Raghīd’s celebration of his first billion dollars and the general backdrop of the Israeli

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 114.

invasion of Beirut. Layla Sabbāk, now known by her Western name as Lilly Spock, is in charge of the party's details. She is the ex-girlfriend of Amīr al-Nīlī. She used to be a revolutionary woman with patriotic principles who despises Raghīd and his class. In her self-imposed exile, Layla has to compromise to survive. She abandons Amīr and joins Raghīd's group. Another character who represents this struggle is Dunya, Nadīm's wife. In her forties now, Dunya used to be a feminist activist and revolutionary artist who wants to challenge traditional customs with her art. Yet she stopped painting after her marriage to Nadīm. Her life becomes totally dedicated to her husband's business.

The 'night of the first billion' brings the characters to self-realisation. Al-Sammān depicts carefully the suffering of her characters and their inner conflicts in the general framework of national identity. The reader witnesses the surrender of certain revolutionaries like Layla to the dominating materialist power, exemplified here by Raghīd. Layla had "grown weary of being friends with losers, [wanted for once] to make an alliance with a winner."<sup>69</sup> She thought that working for Raghīd would bring her money, fame, and power and consequently make her strong and happy. She contemplates:

I used to have a special knack for unwittingly siding with the underdog. It was as if I were the lady friend of goodhearted, gifted and genuine folks who also happened to be down-and-outers financially, socially, politically, and, basically, in every way that has anything to do with earthly life. Never in my entire career have I fallen in love with a winner, or even been attracted to one. . . . My entire history is one big victory for my defeats, and I'm sick of it. So this time I'm going to side with Raghid, the man on the top, not with Amir, the one I love but who also

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<sup>69</sup> Ghādah al-Sammān, *The Night of the First Billion*, Trans. Nancy N. Roberts, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2005), p. 382.



happens to be a marked man who's more or less living on borrowed time.<sup>70</sup>

Layla's contemplation reveals the motives behind her abandonment of her revolutionary principles as lying in her experience of being defeated and left alone repeatedly as a consequence of siding with revolutionary men whom she loved and believed in. However, her new decision to join the powerful materialist group brings her misery and unhappiness when she fails to adopt the roles and ends up defeated again. When she realises the ineffectiveness of her surrender, Layla commits suicide after giving Amīr a farewell kiss.

Throughout the novel, Dunya is full of regret and fear. She realises that the materialistic and superficial life she has chosen eighteen years ago is not fulfilling to her anymore. She is left in anguish and confusion. In her efforts to convince her husband Nadīm to abandon the wealthy immoral life and return to their poor but respectful selves, she realises that she has lost "her sense of inner reality. [Her] feelings are so fickle, [she doesn't] trust them anymore."<sup>71</sup> For Dunya, their misery is the result of their abandonment to their revolutionary principles and joining the endless 'rat race' for wealth and power regardless of the immoral acts they had to carry out such as weapon trade. She blames Nadīm for the disintegration of their family; she addresses him saying: "You don't have a solid reality anymore, either. You've become a parasitic plant that needs to cling to a plant that's bigger. . . . Our children don't have any roots, and you don't either. You're parasitic creatures floating in air saturated with gold dust,

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., pp. 382-3.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 538.

trying to rob other people of their achievements and blessings.”<sup>72</sup> Her disappointment and sadness reach a culmination with the realisation that she abandoned her art and wasted her life working for Nadīm and supporting him only to discover that their marital life was for him only another deal to ensure his wealth and success.

Khalīl, who is forced to run from ‘Beirut nightmares’ to ‘exile’s nightmares’<sup>73</sup>, experiences a series of events which moves between his past in Beirut as a revolutionary into his present in Geneva as an immigrant who is emotionally and psychologically struggling because his country is at war. Cooke acknowledges that in describing the individual’s disintegration the “break up of the memory is essential to the break up of the self in disharmony with the present.”<sup>74</sup> The intensity of the events is accompanied by a strong awareness of Khalīl’s inner fragmentation which results from the disintegration of his society and culminates with his decision to return to Beirut with his two sons; Rāmī and Fādī. Al-Sammān concludes her novel by bringing Khalīl to this responsible decision as a way of emphasising this character as her ‘model of reconstruction’ and manifesting her Decentrism.

While approaching Beirut in a boat, he spots a ship carrying people desperate to escape from Beirut to Cyprus. He ponders: “Where is there to escape to? I ran away like them once. Like them, I rode in the opposite direction [from Beirut to the West] and went scurrying toward the world’s other shore. But I didn’t get out of the cycle of nightmares. Instead, I was like someone swinging back and forth between one

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., pp. 538-9.

<sup>73</sup> See Ghādah al-Sammān, *Laylat al-Milyar (The Night of the First Billion)*, (Bayrūt: Manshūrāt Ghādah al-Sammān, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1991), p. 432. Translation is mine.

<sup>74</sup> Cooke (1988), p. 117.

nightmare and another.”<sup>75</sup> On the one hand, the myriad mentions of ‘Beirut nightmares’ in *The First Billion* form a connection between this novel and *Nightmares*. By doing so, al-Sammān re-emphasises the serialised nature of these novels. On the other hand, Khalīl’s experience in forced exile crystallises in his realisation of the importance of adhering to one’s beliefs and revolutionary principles. Most importantly, it accentuates the necessity of his being in Beirut to help in rebuilding the city after bringing the fighting to an end. He prefers to be humiliated in his homeland by his enemies rather than in exile by his compatriots, while his home is being destroyed.

This awareness culminates when

he felt a renewed sense of dignity. Here [in Beirut], he wouldn’t be a refugee, a homeless wanderer. Never again would he beg for a job, a residence card or an entry visa ... not to mention a number of other things he’d never do again. And if he found his house destroyed, he’d live in a tent in the same spot until he’d rebuilt it. Here was the beginning, not on a chair in a sidewalk café in some European capital, or in Raghid’s morass of depravity.<sup>76</sup>

These feelings of dignity and belonging do not last for long. Upon entering Beirut, Khalīl is shocked with the Israeli checkpoint which replaces the local checkpoints where Lebanese people used to fight among each other. Unlike the local checkpoints which consisted of barrels decorated with slogans and pictures of political leaders, the Israeli one is simply a dirty white thin string. He is upset and confused nearly regrets returning to Beirut with his two sons. All of the sudden he catches the sight of a multicoloured kite in the sunny skies of demolished Beirut. This particular moment

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<sup>75</sup> Al-Sammān (2005), p. 544.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 544.

convinces him that he has done the right thing by coming back home. He decides to stay—otherwise who is going to cut the ‘Israeli’ string?

- **MASQUERADE FOR THE DEAD**

While *The First Billion* closes in Beirut, *Masquerade for the Dead* opens in Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris. In the airport’s waiting hall, a group of Lebanese meet while waiting for their flight to Beirut. The time is Christmas holiday 1999, almost ten years after the end of the Lebanese civil war. Salīmā and Mārīyā are old friends; they left Beirut at the beginning of the war when Dānā, Salīmā’s daughter, and Fawwāz were little kids. Each of them has his/her own reason for returning to Beirut. These two generations reflect different perspectives on their return to post-war Beirut. While the older generation is looking forward to revisiting the sweet memories of their youth in pre-war Beirut, the younger generation is scared of a city which left them at a very young age only with horrible memories of blood and death.

Fawwāz is visiting Beirut to sell the family’s old house which is worth a fortune after the war. He intends to use the money to start his own company back in Paris, his new homeland. Upon his visit to the old house, he feels the presence of his father’s ghost. His memories lead him to contemplate his stolen childhood. He realises that now “it is the time of disguised childhood and masquerades of dead children. Those children whose childhood was assassinated mercilessly during the war, in exile or during fake peaceful times. ... yet it is the same result.”<sup>77</sup> Fawwāz underlines the unsettled situation in Beirut and its effects on its inhabitants—even on Lebanese who live in exile. He

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<sup>77</sup> Ghādah al-Sammān, *Sahrah Tanakuriyyah li-l-Mawtā (Masquerade for the Dead)*, (Bayrūt: Manshūrāt Ghādah al-Sammān, 2003), p. 86. Translation of the title and all reference from this novel are mine.

refers to the aftermath of the war as 'false peaceful times'. Hence anxiety and fear continue to occupy considerable space in post-war Beirut.

The title of *Masquerade for the Dead* refers to the symbolic death of pre-war generation of righteous Beirutis; especially poets, writers, and politicians. This symbolic death is best presented in their deep disappointment in the corruption and immorality which has exploded in Beirut since the war, and the Beirutis' hopelessness in this situation. An example of this sense is symbolised when the old famous poet addresses Fawwāz saying: "Yes, your mother passed away in a sense and I am a motionless corpse .. Don't you see my skull smiling for you? The remaining flesh and hair on my face are my masquerading mask, soon worms will take it off for me in my grave."<sup>78</sup> This kind of revelation highlights the hollow nature of life in post-war Beirut—it is as if people are masquerading in roles designed for them, especially in the absence of genuine emotional connections, of an authentic art, and of freedom itself.

Like the previous three novels in this quartet, one of the prevalent themes of *Masquerade* is the increasing class distinction in Lebanese communities, both in Lebanon and in exile. Yet in *Masquerade* there is an excessive description of Lebanese superficiality and the increasing importance of appearances among the Beirutis in the aftermath of the war. Such materialism and the luxuries available to the small group of the rich fascinate tourists like Mari Rose. For a more realistic view, Samīrah takes Fawwāz in a trip around Beirut to let him see poor neighbourhoods of the city and the surrounding districts. She shows him the lines of young men queuing in front of foreign embassies 'begging' for immigration visas. She explains: "there is serious financial

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 237.

crisis here. Poverty is reality. Anxiety is reality. And yet the mysterious fear of tomorrow is the biggest of these realities ... Do not let your family's and friends' big feasts deceive you. There is real poverty here.”<sup>79</sup> This poverty is presented as one of the main causes that perpetuate the unstable situation in Lebanon in the aftermath of the Lebanese civil war.

Moreover, it is this poverty that made young men like Nājī and ‘Abdul Karīm immigrate to France. However, living aboard did not exempt them from the humiliation their humble backgrounds brings to them among other Lebanese. In order to gain the respect of the Lebanese group in the waiting hall at Charles de Gaulle airport, Nājī the waiter, assumes the character of hotel manager. Likewise, the unemployed ‘Abdul Karīm claims to be the son of Qahristan’s prime minister since they both share the exact name.<sup>80</sup> Nājī is going to Lebanon to visit his mother. He is distressed, however, at the thought of his brothers’ contempt of his poverty. He recalls their scornful remarks: “Do not come to visit us if you are not rich! If you’ve got a piaster, you’re worth a piaster!”<sup>81</sup> Although they would say such remarks jokingly, he would still understand his worthlessness to them as long as he remained lacking in wealth. It is only his mother who loves him the way he is and it is only for her that he returns to visit. It is worth mentioning that in *Beirut ’75* Farah experiences similar situation when he feels disdained wherever he goes in Beirut, especially when the hotel employee keeps

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 296.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., pp. 17-22.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

harassing him for his poverty by saying: “If you’ve got a piaster, you’re worth a piaster.”<sup>82</sup>

In *Masquerade* al-Sammān illustrates how Nājī’s humble background only becomes an issue to him when he returns to Lebanon to visit his mother. In his interior monologue, Nājī explains his content with his life in Paris; he is happy with the free education and medical and public services. He admits his disapproval with the French style of social life: “Although I am a French citizen now, I failed to become French at many levels specifically in family matters. . . . I failed to adapt to the French social norms so I decided not to start a family there.”<sup>83</sup> Despite his contentment and happiness in his life in Paris, Nājī is reminded of his worthlessness as a poor Lebanese young man by the unfair treatment he gets on his trip to Beirut. When he is moved from his comfortable seat into a narrow seat by the restrooms only to accommodate a more important passenger, he realises that “this is the type of life that suits a destitute like myself. . . . simple people like me will be thrown out of the plane in the case of overbooking.”<sup>84</sup> This kind of distress encourages Nājī to conduct fraudulent operations upon his arrival in Beirut to escape his poverty and move to a higher social class.

Poverty and class distinction are not the only themes on which al-Sammān hearkens back to previous novels. Through the character of the writer Mārīyā, the reader is reminded with different scenes from previous novels in this quartet. Through Mārīyā’s memories, we are reminded of the scene from *Nightmares* when the protagonist’s lover is killed at one of the checkpoints, while she is scarred on her arm to

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<sup>82</sup> Al-Sammān (1995), p. 22.

<sup>83</sup> Al-Sammān (2003), p. 44.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

remind her of her religious sect.<sup>85</sup> In *Masquerade*, Khātoun, the fortune-teller in *Nightmares*, is recalled briefly in a reference to her vision of blood. Though the scene is portrayed when Mārīyā's friends seek the fortune-teller's advice in emotional matters, Khātoun tells Mārīyā: "I see blood, again, a lot of blood. I see earthquakes, fires and houses divide into two parts and more."<sup>86</sup> Khalīl from *The First Billion* is back in *Masquerade*. He is a close friend of Fawwāz's father and the father of his beloved Samīrah.<sup>87</sup> Muṣṭafā, the poor fisherman from *Beirut '75* and the promising revolutionary is recalled in the form of a successful exploitative businessman and militia leader whose ghost traces Mārīyā, his creator, in an absurdist atmosphere.<sup>88</sup>

The scenes of Muṣṭafā confronting Mārīyā are the most absurdist sequences in the novel. Absurdism pervades the general atmosphere of *Masquerade*: in the presence of ghosts of dead people, such as Fawwāz's father's which haunts his house along with other ghosts of his great-grandfathers, or in Mārīyā's recollection of her memories which is accompanied by the presence of her lover's ghost, or in the sequence where Mārīyā takes Fawwāz and Samīrah in a metaphysical trip around Beirut where she tries to make them see pre-war Beirut through recalling her memories, as well as in the scenes of the reincarnation of Salīmā's husband in Walīd, who becomes her lover.

In *Masquerade*, nationalist and feminist concerns are still at the centre of the story fused with a wider interest in depicting the effects of exile on those who had to leave during the war. I consider this tendency to represent Lebanese communities outside Lebanon exemplary of al-Sammān's Decentrism in depicting the 'totality of the

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., pp. 130-1.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., pp. 256-7.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., pp. 180-1, 267-73.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., pp. 94-6.



war' that affects every aspect of the Lebanese life in Lebanon and abroad. The characters of Nājī and 'Abdul Karīm represent the frustration and forfeiture of the youth who flee Lebanon with the dream of a better life. Yet they suffer from great alienation and physical expatriation. Like the previous three novels in this quartet, the end of most characters is tragic. The reader is left with very little hope with the depiction of successful con operations like those led by Nājī and 'Abdul Karīm. Fawwāz returns to Paris without accomplishing the main reason of his trip; selling his family's house. This is an indication of the persistence of his sincere nationalist affiliation, represented in his keeping his father's house which for him is a symbol of his father's nationalist struggle for freedom. Salīmā and Mārīyā return to their routine life in Paris with little hope of a better future for Lebanon.

Finally, Samīrah refuses to marry Fawwāz and to leave Beirut for Paris even though she loves him. Her insistence on staying in Beirut to participate in building up a new Lebanon is recollected by the symbol of the colourful kite her father, Khalīl, saw upon his return to Beirut at the end of *The First Billion*; I consider this reference another link between the four novels in the quartet. Most importantly, Samīrah's decision to stay in Beirut manifests of the concept of 'responsibility' as formulated by the Beirut Decentrists: for women responsibility "entails action to do what others are expecting. [It is] achieved by choosing action, that is, initiating response to the needs of others."<sup>89</sup> In this thesis, I consider the character of Samīrah the culmination of al-Sammān's portrayal of women's responsibility in the context of the Lebanese civil war where

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<sup>89</sup> Cooke (1988), pp. 88-9.

silence and non-participation are seen as “a crime.”<sup>90</sup> With this character, al-Sammān reaches the double-edged goal of the Beirut Decentrists: “to survive but even more, to give survival meaning. Responsibility should combine the female sense of duty to others with the male sense of the rights of hierarchical space. Only then could real change take place, could hope for the future be nurtured.”<sup>91</sup> Samīrah’s decision to stay in Beirut asserts the power of this masculinised sense of hierarchical space since it recalls the decision of her father Khalīl to return to Beirut. It does, however, affirm the female sense of responsibility which is an essential feature of the Beirut Decentrists’ portrayal of hope and survival since “survival was to live on for something, and for many of the Decentrists that something became with time the homeland.”<sup>92</sup> This argument leads to Cooke’s conclusion that survival “brought an *existential* reward: to have stayed was to be Lebanese.”<sup>93</sup> Therefore, Samīrah’s feminist consciousness is reflected in her patriotic responsibility towards the survival of her community which in turn can be seen as an existentialist experience. Al-Sammān concludes her quartet with this responsible choice of homeland over the lover to underline the Decentrists’ message of hope.

In this quartet, al-Sammān reflects the developing of the war story with a distinctive feminist consciousness that covers different phases of the war and the concurrent developments of women’s sense of responsibility in reaction to the happenings: starting with Yasmīnah’s passivity and irresponsibility before the war,

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 164. Emphasis is mine. The existentialist features of this character will be discussed in detail in Chapter Five. I find it interesting, however, that al-Sammān chooses this existentialist character to illustrate her ultimate goal of hope and survival as a Beirut Decentrist.

moving into the responsible actions of the anonymous protagonist and Maryam during the war, reaching another height with the bitter defeat of the previously-responsible Dunya and Layla in the period following the 1982 Israeli invasion of Beirut, and culminating with an assertive sense of responsibility in post-war Beirut through the character of Samīrah to deliver the message of a hopeful future. Although the following chapters will provide detailed analyses of these female characters, it is worth mentioning here that through such representation al-Sammān masterfully satisfies the criteria of a Beirut Decentrist.

### **SUCCINCT NOTES ON THEMES AND LITERARY TECHNIQUES OF THE QUARTET**

Through the analyses carried out here, these four novels can be considered to form a quartet. Al-Sammān seems to establish superficiality, materialism, and consumerism and the consequent class distinction as the most persistent themes in her four novels, which represent some of the causes of the civil strife in Lebanon. She illustrates this in *Nightmares* through a dialogue between the two mannequins in one of the big shops in al-Ḥamrah Street, one of the most fashionable and busiest shopping districts in Beirut. The female mannequin questions the disappearance of those who used to bestow their admiring gazes on her and the expensive clothes she used to show. Instead, during the war she sees “some men and women standing on the pavement outside and glaring furiously at her and her companion. After reading the price tags hanging from their chests, they shook their fists menacingly, then ran off, their feet

unshod and their faces careworn and livid.”<sup>94</sup> Therefore, the rich consumers who are capable of affording the mannequin expensive clothes have run away while poor frustrated people are trapped in Beirut during the war.

The mannequins represent the outsiders in Beirut. This can be seen as an attempt by al-Sammān to remain objective in her approach to the war. This theme is recalled from *Beirut '75* where the feudalists' materialism of Nimr al-Sakīnī, for instance, is displayed clearly. The same theme is resumed again in *The First Billion* and *Masquerade* as has been illustrated above. It is worth mentioning that al-Sammān had previously tackled this theme in her collection of short stories *Raḥīl al-Marāfi' al-Qadīmah* (*Departure of the Ancient Ports*; 1973) which demarcates the beginning of her post-1967 writings where “her subject-matter broadens in scope, extending to a comprehensive vision of Arab society that sees the broader issues in human relations, including those between the sexes.”<sup>95</sup>

Al-Sammān's previous exposition of class distinction is, however, different from the way she explores this theme in her quartet. For instance, in “Armalat al-Farah” (“The Widow of Happiness”) from *Departure*, al-Sammān explores the futility of bourgeois women's lives when lacking real nationalist or feminist beliefs, or even love. The life of Nīnār, the protagonist, is largely influenced by her emotional relationship with her lover, Hānī. While she surrenders to the easy life of her bourgeois class (although she calls them “the gang of bourgeois Mafia”<sup>96</sup>), she is unable to bring any significant change to her surroundings, and ends up feeling trapped in a life without

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<sup>94</sup> Al-Sammān (1997), p. 265.

<sup>95</sup> Awwad (1983), p. 11

<sup>96</sup> Al-Sammān (1992), p. 54. English translation of short stories' titles as well as quotations from this collection is mine. Transliteration is mine.

meaning. Through her maid, who represents the lower classes, there is a hint of the national struggle against the Israelis. Yet Nīnār neither shows any interest in this struggle nor any affiliation with it, as she is too busy contending with her individual alienation and her failure in opposing her class. In this way, al-Sammān expostulates about materialism and consumerism in order to expose class distinction and the suffering of the poor in Arab societies. Yet her recent works transcend the individual dilemma—as explored in her post-1967 writings—to include the larger society, and further highlight the correlation between class difference and political crises as manifested in her quartet.

The repetition of certain themes is one of the many links between al-Sammān's four novels. At certain times, however, these repetitions seem to serve little purpose, an issue which is highlighted by Shukrī who, while noting that these repeated elements may be attributable to fatigue, in the end considers them unnecessary additions, marginal comments, and boring, even exhausting explanations, which may be disregarded by the reader since they do not detract from al-Sammān's overall proficiency in writing.<sup>97</sup>

However, in the context of this thesis, I consider these repetitions a major flaw in al-Sammān's quartet. Despite the link these themes provide to connect her four novels to form a quartet, this repetitive aspect reflects a certain kind of regression of her work throughout the years, contrary to the expected improvement of her literary style

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<sup>97</sup> Shukrī (1990), p. 196-7. He also refers to the repetition in the titles of her works such as *Ḥubb* (Love; 1973) and *A'lantu 'Alayka al-Ḥubb* (I Declared Love on You; 1976). I add to this *Zaman al-Ḥubb al-Ākhar* (The Time of the Other Love; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1979), *Al-Ḥubb min al-Warīd ila al-Warīd* (Love from the Vein to the Vein; 1990), *Al-Ābadīyyah Laḥẓat Ḥubb* (Eternity is a Second of Love; 1999), and her relatively recent book *Muḥākamat Ḥubb* (Love Trial; 2004).

and thematic concerns. For example, al-Sammān's first full-length novel, *Beirut '75*, is relatively short while the rest of the quartet is much longer; this is more obvious in her last two works where sometimes it feels as if the writer is desperate to share all her knowledge, memories, and thoughts with the reader by repeating over and over again, incidents that are mentioned previously in her other works.

Al-Sammān seems most prone to repetition in *The First Billion*. The relatively long novel, 492 pages in Arabic and 547 pages in English translation, could be a shorter work without the excessive descriptions of some scenes and repetitions of some ideas. For example, Raghid's meanness, obsession with gold, and his hatred and humiliation of others is repeated many times in the novel for no obvious technical reason related to the narrative style.<sup>98</sup> Another example is the prolonged dialogue between Amir and Dunya about Dunya's past and her exhibition of portraits of naked men.<sup>99</sup> Al-Sammān's excessive description of Geneva and its peaceful luxurious atmosphere in comparison to Beirut is also repeated unnecessarily in many places in the novel. This prolonged description marks a slight difference to al-Sammān's style in her first novel *Beirut '75*. While the feverish atmosphere of *Nightmares* is capable of absorbing such excessive details, the narrative style of *The First Billion* seems to be superfluous with it.

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<sup>98</sup> See al-Sammān (2005), pp. 274-9.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., pp. 317-8.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter I present a brief reconstruction of the narrative of each of the following four novels by al-Sammān: *Beirut '75*, *Nightmares*, *The First Billion*, and *Masquerade*. My analyses of particular incidents and characters within each work underline the links between these four novels and establish them as a quartet. In this quartet, al-Sammān sets the Lebanese civil war as the backdrop against which she carefully explores feminist and nationalist issues. Within this quartet, the narrative develops from anticipating the civil strife in *Beirut '75* to depicting the war while it is ongoing in *Nightmares* and finally to revealing the perpetuation of the war's motives, which cause the post-war instability of Lebanese both inside Lebanon and in exile.

As a Beirut Decentrist, al-Sammān expresses a feminist consciousness in her narration of the Lebanese war by highlighting women's rising responsibility towards the happenings as the fight rages on and their participation in their community survival. This style of re-telling the war is specific to women writers who choose to reflect the totality of the human experience of the war inside and outside Lebanon and neglect the war's ideological aspect. Al-Sammān sustains this style of writing in her quartet while adding a dynamic development to the characters to match the different phases of the war.

While approaching these issues, al-Sammān broadens the scope of the argument to include other aspects of Lebanese society and correlates class and gender distinctions to various national crises. As such, this quartet provides a new dimension to al-Sammān's pre- and post-1967 works. I consider this quartet representative of al-

Sammān's post-1975 writings which highlights the impact of the Lebanese war on her literary production and in a way underlines her Decentrism. This in turn emphasises the significant influence of the political situation in the Levant on the writings of *the avant-gardes*. Within these post-1975 works, this chapter identifies the recurrence of certain themes and characters in al-Sammān's quartet as a major flaw of her literary style.

Besides, this chapter forms a basis for the subsequent examination of existentialist characteristics in al-Sammān's quartet. This quartet remains, however, unfinished: I consider al-Sammān's question mark at the end of *Masquerade*, 'End?', questioning whether there ever is an end to the crises in Lebanon specifically and the Arab world on a larger scale—in addition, I regard it a typical existentialist gesture. The Lebanese civil war provides an ideal setting for existentialist themes such as alienation, love, and death, and questions such as 'what is the purpose of one's life'. It also imparts the absurdist atmosphere which is prevalent in these four novels. I consider this an expression of al-Sammān's interest in existentialism, a subject which has not been explored yet in detail in al-Sammān's works. Thus this quartet presents a literary material with which to explore existentialism in al-Sammān's novels. The following two chapters will explore existentialism, especially as a literary movement and provide examples of existentialist feminist and nationalist characteristics within al-Sammān's quartet.





## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **ETHICS AND AESTHETICS: LITERARY EXISTENTIALISM IN AL-SAMMĀN'S QUARTET**

This chapter provides a general overview of existentialism as a philosophical and literary movement. In the light of this introductory overview, al-Sammān's implementation of some of the characteristics of literary existentialism will be illuminated. The previous account of her quartet will greatly help to illustrate this creative aspect of al-Sammān's writings through the considerable employment of various examples, based on analyses of the characters and incidents in the quartet. The exploration of al-Sammān's literary existentialism provides the necessary background with which to examine the existentialist aspects of feminist and nationalist trends of her quartet. This also underlines the avant-garde aspect of al-Sammān's works and her innovative contribution to contemporary women's literature in the Mashriq.

#### **LITERARY EXISTENTIALISM: GENERAL OVERVIEW**

In this section, I will present a general overview of existentialism as a philosophical and literary movement with greater emphasis placed on the latter. My intention is to shed light on the main thematic concerns of literary existentialist works

and to explore some of the movement's literary conventions through highlighting the impact of times of crisis, especially wars, on literary production and the effect of such situations on literary existentialism. In this section, I will provide the necessary background to the following discussion of the existentialist characteristics of al-Sammān's literature, a topic which will be explored in the following sections.

- **EXISTENTIALISM AS A PHILOSOPHY**

'Existentialism' is a word coined by Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973), a French philosopher and leading Christian existentialist, some time after the First World War.<sup>1</sup> However, the roots of existentialist thought "can be traced far back in the history of philosophy and even into man's pre-philosophical attempts to attain to some self-understanding."<sup>2</sup> Hence, the roots of existentialism can be first seen in "mythological stage of thought."<sup>3</sup> It can then be traced in the teachings of certain major philosophical traditions such as the Abrahamic and Buddhist traditions.<sup>4</sup> John Macquarrie argues that signs of existentialist thought may also be traced to many ancient cultures, stating that in Greek culture, reference can be made to renowned names such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, and that other examples may be found in the traditions of Confucius and Lao-Tse in China and Zarathustra in Iran.<sup>5</sup>

Existentialism of the twentieth century is highly influenced by earlier philosophers and thinkers such as Pascal Blaise (1623–1662), Søren Kierkegaard (1813–

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<sup>1</sup> See Joseph Mahon, *Existentialism, Feminism and Simone De Beauvoir*, (New York: Palgrave, 1997), p.1.

<sup>2</sup> John Macquarrie, *Existentialism: An Introduction, Guide and Assessment*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 34.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>4</sup> Here Macquarrie sets a period of two or three centuries before and after 500 BC as 'a turning point in human history' where 'reflective', 'critical', and 'radical' way of thinking started being actual. See ibid., pp. 37-43.

<sup>5</sup> For more information about these philosophers see ibid., pp. 37-8.

1855), Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), Franz Kafka (1883- 1924), Karl Jaspers (1883-1969), and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). These philosophers are considered the forerunners of contemporary existentialists, though they never used the term existentialism. Later, towards the mid-twentieth century, other figures become associated with existentialist themes. Names like Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), and Albert Camus (1913-1960), to name a few, become popular and associated with French existentialism which “has become probably the best-known of all existentialisms.”<sup>6</sup>

The philosophy of existentialism is mainly concerned with the meaning of human existence. However, existentialism as a philosophy is hard to define due to its broad applications throughout its history.<sup>7</sup> In his attempts to define existentialism, Macquarrie acknowledges that it “does remain true, however, that there is no common body of doctrine to which all existentialists subscribe”.<sup>8</sup> For this reason, he considers existentialism as a “style of philosophizing” rather than a “philosophy”. Yet he recognises certain basic characteristics of this style of philosophising. For Macquarrie,

this style of philosophizing begins from man rather than from nature. It is a philosophy of the subject rather than of the object [where] the subject is the existent in the whole range of [the existentialist’s] existing. He is not only a thinking subject but an initiator of action and a centre of

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 58. It is worth mentioning that Macquarrie neither counts de Beauvoir among French existentialists nor mentions her in his book. This emphasizes Mahon’s argument of the exclusion of de Beauvoir from most of the twentieth-century’s major philosophical works. See Mahon (1997), p. ix.

<sup>7</sup> See Joseph Shahwān, *al-Manḥā al-Wujūdī fī al-Qiṣṣah al-Lubnānīyyah al-Mu‘āṣirah (Existentialist Trend in Contemporary Lebanese Story)*, Diploma Thesis, (Kaslik: Jāmi‘at al-Rūḥ al-Qudus, 1982), pp. 21-33.

<sup>8</sup> Macquarrie (1985), p. 14.

feeling. It is this whole spectrum of existence, known directly and concretely in the very act of existing, that existentialism tries to express.<sup>9</sup>

Within this approach to existentialism, Macquarrie selects some of the themes which recur in existentialist writings. Themes such as “freedom, decision, and responsibility [which] constitute the core of personal being”<sup>10</sup>, are dominant in the works of existentialist philosophers. He also identifies other existentialist themes such as “finitude, guilt, alienation, despair, death [and] the emotional life of man”<sup>11</sup> which have not been fully tackled in traditional philosophy.<sup>12</sup>

To this end, Macquarrie warns us “not to lump together as ‘existentialist’ any literature that happens to show penetration into the problems of human existence [through indefinite and vague implementation of these themes], or we shall be in danger of voiding the term of any significant content.”<sup>13</sup> He suggests that literary existentialist works are those which highlight the above-mentioned ‘recurring themes’.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Macquarrie draws attention to the “existentialist of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries [as being] aware of a crisis, a threat, a fragmentation and alienation that are new in their chilling intensity.”<sup>15</sup> In this sense, Macquarrie considers the experience of crises as a necessary stimulus to the implementation of existentialist themes.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>12</sup> It is worth mentioning that the themes of guilt, responsibility, and justice have been explored in the early stages of existentialist thoughts and throughout Greek and Eastern philosophies. See Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 262.

<sup>14</sup> See Ibid., p. 263. Macquarrie adds to this list more themes such as the “peculiar and indefinable intensity of feeling”.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 263.

- **EXISTENTIALISM AS A LITERARY MOVEMENT**

In modern European history, World War II—with the complications it brought to the notion of human existence—provided twentieth century writers with rich existentialist material. During this period existentialism ceased to be a concern of philosophers only, and began to appear in literature that was not exclusively philosophical, such as the writings of Sartre, de Beauvoir, Camus, and others.<sup>16</sup> To this end, ‘literary existentialism’ is most often delineated as a movement lasting from 1935 until 1960.<sup>17</sup>

As an example of literary existentialism of this period, Joseph Mahon attempts to assess the contribution of de Beauvoir’s *Pyrrhus and Cineas* to existentialist philosophy. He considers existentialism as “a kind of philosophy which is preoccupied with the most salient and poignant features of human existence, such as death, love, responsibility and despair”.<sup>18</sup> According to Mahon, this definition applies not only to

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<sup>16</sup> In his study, Hans Van Stralen chooses to put full emphasis on the work of Sartre, de Beauvoir, Camus, Blaman and Borchert. He states that the work of these five authors “complies practically *entirely* with the criteria of literary existentialism. [These five authors] stood at the cradle of the movement which [he] would like to consider as being literary existentialism. [Also] Blaman and Borchert wrote similar texts to those of Sartre and Camus without ever having been in (direct) contact with each other.” He considers them as representatives of the first wave of literary existentialism and ‘exemplary for this movement’. See Hans Van Stralen, *Choices and Conflicts: Essays on Literature and Existentialism*, (Brussels: P.I.E.-Peter Lang, 2005), p. 71. While examining al-Sammān’s quartet, I focus on Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Camus to highlight their influence on al-Sammān. In this chapter, I rely heavily on Hans Van Stralen’s analysis and understanding of literary existentialism. This is mainly because he offers a detailed study of Sartre, Camus, and de Beauvoir, by whom, as I will argue later, al-Sammān is highly influenced. Also, Stralen’s study offers the most detailed analysis I come across in my research which deals with existentialism in a literary context. His study also takes into consideration the international aspects of this movement which make it applicable to al-Sammān’s quartet. However, other studies will be referred to, though as secondary references.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>18</sup> Mahon (1997), p. 8. Mahon states in note 29, p. 198, that this is an ethical and anthropological definition of existentialism rather an ontological and phenomenological one. This perspective in defining existentialism does not affect its application on literature; especially that ethics is a prominent feature of the works of both Sartre and de Beauvoir. For a phenomenological overview of existentialism see Nabīl Ayyūb, *Al-Ṭarā’iq Ilā Naṣṣ al-Qār’ al-Mukhtalif (Means of Approaching the Text of The Unconventional Reader)*, (Bayrūt: Dār al-Maktabah al-Ahliyyah, 1997), pp. 230-3.

*Pyrrhus and Cineas* (published in 1944, during the Second World War), but also to any literature written during times of war, since, in Mahon's view, literature reflecting on times of crisis is preoccupied with "subjects of human nature, freedom, religious belief, morality, death and commitment [which are] quintessentially existentialist themes."<sup>19</sup> Therefore, according to both Mahon and Macquarrie, a literary work which is written during times of crisis and explores any of the existentialist recurring themes can be studied as existentialist work. In the light of this argument, I will later seek to prove that al-Sammān's quartet can be considered as also constituting a form of existentialist literature.

Existentialist literary productions take on a special importance, states Macquarrie, as they pass on existentialist views to ordinary readers who are not exposed to formal philosophical productions.<sup>20</sup> He sets *La Peste*, *La Nausée*, and *Huis Clos* as examples of literary productions which "must have carried the existentialist teaching to scores of thousands of people who would never read a formal philosophical treatise."<sup>21</sup> Thus, existentialism, when expressed in genres such as novels and plays, has a more immediately expressive function than concrete philosophy. Moreover, these genres reflect best the reciprocity between existentialism as philosophy and the culture in which it is produced. Macquarrie explains this reciprocal relation in two main respects:

On the one hand existentialism brings to explicit intellectual form currents that run deep in contemporary culture, [and that existentialism] has on the other hand something of a prophetic function; it criticizes

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<sup>19</sup> Mahon (1997), p. 9.

<sup>20</sup> See Macquarrie (1985), p. 262.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 262. *Huis Clos* is the French original of *No Exit* meaning literally *In Camera* or 'behind closed doors'. It was adapted for cinema in 1954 by Jacqueline Audry.

much in the contemporary world, and above all it criticizes everything that seems to threaten the possibility of authentic humanity.<sup>22</sup>

Thus literary existentialism reflects and/or criticises cultural and social realities which reach its climax during times of crisis.

One of the foremost authorities on literary existentialism, Hans Van Stralen, offers his consideration of how three authors of the era—Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Camus—appropriated and redeployed this philosophy in their literary works. Sartre and de Beauvoir he considers the virtual founders of literary existentialism, primarily because they lived and wrote in a time and place (mid-twentieth century France) that saw many years of political, economic, and social crises, and existentialism, as Maurice Cranston reminds us, is primarily a “philosophy of crisis”.<sup>23</sup> But the literary existentialism of these two authors was not merely a product of philosophical existentialism, nor did it simply reproduce that philosophy’s tenets and motifs.<sup>24</sup> Rather, as Stralen points out, these authors used literary existentialism “as a form of convention-transfer between the philosophical and the literary circuit and not as a variation between strictly literary conventions.”<sup>25</sup> Thus Stralen views Sartre and de Beauvoir as exemplary authors of literary existentialism and sees as their distinctive

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 256.

<sup>23</sup> Maurice Cranston, ‘Simone de Beauvoir’, in *The Novelist as Philosopher: Studies in French Fiction 1935-1960*, John Cruickshank (Ed.), (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 166-182 (172). Stralen states that “literary existentialism should be considered, first and foremost to be a French-German affair” for these two countries have a long history of philosophical traditions and they both were highly instrumental in both World Wars. See Stralen (2005), p. 67. Macquarrie, too, states that “Germany and France have been the countries where existentialism has attained its greatest development”. See Macquarrie (1985), p. 59.

<sup>24</sup> Stralen (2005), p. 21.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 56.



features in this regard their emphasis on the importance of ethics and the responsibility of each human being towards himself/herself and humanity in general.<sup>26</sup>

After setting the approximate time frame and subject matter of the European literary existentialist movement, Stralen attempts to study ‘the semantic universe of literary existentialism’. He starts from two lines: “the ethic and the aesthetic variant of literary existentialism, which can be related with the work of Sartre and Camus respectively.”<sup>27</sup> Stralen views Sartre as an ethical philosopher who believes that reality is fundamentally unjust and wants to bring the world’s injustice to an end by moving ‘his fellow man’ to action through becoming engaged in literature which is supposed to raise the readers’ ethical consciousness. In the ethical tradition, man is made responsible for personal and public abuse, hence the negative attitude towards reality. Yet Sartre emphasises that ‘man is free’ and has responsibility towards his future. Here Sartre’s views resemble those of Kierkegaard and Heidegger.<sup>28</sup>

Though Sartre and Camus are interested in ethics, each pursues the subject in a way that is largely opposed to the other’s. While Sartre wishes to change reality by liberating man from its negativity, Camus accepts and acknowledges all the absurdities of reality “in the realization that, ultimately, reality cannot be changed.”<sup>29</sup> This does not mean, as Stralen stresses, we should consider Camus’ aesthetics ‘decadent’ or ‘fond of reality’, for Camus, in Stralen’s view, tends to glorify the beauty of nature and man’s relationship with it. Hence he terms Camus’ approach the “existentialism of the art of

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<sup>26</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>28</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 72-3.

<sup>29</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 73.

life”.<sup>30</sup> It should be noted, however, that in accepting the world and its absurdities and seeing them as a cause for despair, even depression, Camus can be aligned with such existentialist philosophers as Kafka and Nietzsche.<sup>31</sup>

- **GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF LITERARY EXISTENTIALISM**

Stralen attempts to understand literary existentialism “from three semantic topoi, i.e. the (limit) situation, the other and the engagement.”<sup>32</sup> These three topoi are connected to each other and form a sequence which is obvious in literary existentialist texts. He explains:

Nearly every literary existentialist text begins with the depiction of a specific situation into which the character has not yet got a clear insight. Then there often follows an event, not construed by the individual, i.e. an illness, a political attack, but usually the war, which thoroughly alters his circumstances. In other words, the situation comes under pressure and thus becomes a *limit situation*. In literary existentialism, World War II is considered to be the most universal limit situation, whether explicitly stated or no.<sup>33</sup>

It is this kind of situation which creates in the character the existential feelings and thoughts of death and mortality and brings the question of ‘the reason of existence’ back to the centre. Thus, the ‘limit situation’ creates ‘primary emotions’ which result in an ‘awakening’: this “limit situation reveals a break between experience and reason, between the ‘I’ and the other, between the pre-rational and the rational domain.” This awakening brings into sight “the other [who only] can pressurize the world of the individual – in existentialist thinking – either alone or collectively.” In this second

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<sup>30</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 73, note 60.

<sup>31</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75. According to Macquarrie, the ‘limit situation’ is first discussed/found by Karl Jaspers. This limit situation “opens to us the reality of Transcendence” not “nihilism”. See Macquarrie (1985), p. 56. In this paper, this understanding of the ‘limit situation’ will be adopted.

phase, previous ‘feelings of shame, nausea or angst’, continue to exist. Finally, ‘engagement’ is manifested in every “conscious decision which one takes in consequence” to the previous two phases.<sup>34</sup>

Thus the decision of the character can be “a total resignation to the negative situation” which is characterised as failure, “the acceptance of the situation”, or the character can take “an attitude to life, which is based on a deep confidence in the scope of human freedom and of a certain realization of responsibility for society and the other.” At this point Stralen defines ‘engagement’ as “a way of life which, in the form of direct views and choices, provides proof of concern with the personal situation and that of the other, choices which are made from insight into a tense situation which has been temporarily obscure for the character.” His definition illustrates the inextricable bond between the three literary conventions mentioned above.<sup>35</sup> I will seek to examine this bond in the following sections by analysing some examples from al-Sammān’s quartet.

This section has provided a general overview of existentialism as a philosophy. It also defines literary existentialism as a movement which has arisen in Europe in the mid-twentieth century, and was stimulated by World War II. It highlights its most prominent themes such as love, despair, responsibility, alienation, and death to name a few. This section argues that literary existentialist authors are mainly French and German and exemplified by Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Camus. It explores very briefly ethical and aesthetic literary existentialist trends in relation to their application by Sartre and Camus respectively. Finally literary existentialism has been illustrated from three

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<sup>34</sup> See Stralen (2005), p. 76.

<sup>35</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 76-7.

philosophical and conceptual literary conventions: the limit situation, the other, and engagement.

In concluding this section, it is worth mentioning that this movement faded away in the 1960s, due to both external and internal reasons. The external reasons are displayed in the “literary-external developments, which are expressed mainly in distaste for the mixing of literature and ethics, the rejection of commitment and the wish to write about other things than World War II”.<sup>36</sup> The internal reasons are expressed mostly by Sartre’s and de Beauvoir’s gradual interest in Marxism around the beginning of the fifties and Camus’ death in 1960.<sup>37</sup> The historical changes of that period helped these writers to shape the literary form of existentialism in a way that expresses their experience with events such as the rise of technology and World War II.<sup>38</sup> However, the change of these circumstances and the new views adopted after World War II marked the end of literary existentialism as a movement. In this sense, Stralen considers the short-lived literary existentialism as ‘flash in the pan’. This is applicable to the European context, taking into consideration that this literary style has been adopted in other parts of the world at later stages. It is the ‘ethical premises’ of literary existentialism which distinguishes this movement from other movements in the twentieth century.<sup>39</sup> This way of understanding literary existentialism and its characteristics will be implemented in the analysis of al-Sammān’s quartet in the following sections. Here it is worth emphasising that al-Sammān pursues literary existentialism at a later stage and in a different geographical and cultural background.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>37</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>39</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 71-2.

The following argument explores al-Sammān's implementation of some aspects of European literary existentialism which marks her innovative contribution to the body of Arab women's writings.

### **EXISTENTIALISM IN AL-SAMMĀN'S QUARTET**

In the light of the general overview of 'literary existentialism' outlined above, in this section I will demonstrate how al-Sammān engages with existentialist<sup>40</sup> themes and techniques in her writing. This will be done by applying Stralen's study of the main characteristics of literary existentialism to al-Sammān's quartet. For this purpose, it is necessary first to shed light on al-Sammān's literary background by briefly exploring some of her pre-1975 works and the impact of Western literature—especially existentialist works—on her literary production. This will be followed by analysis of some examples from this quartet in the light of some specific literary existentialist motives.

- **SOME OF THE LITERARY CHARACTERISTICS OF AL-SAMMĀN'S PRE-1975 WORKS**

Al-Sammān is considered "the most important novelist for new Arab generations."<sup>41</sup> She is not limited in her writings by themes simply related to women's liberation, unlike other Arab women writers such as Colette Khūrī, Laylā Ba'albakī, and

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<sup>40</sup> I have chosen the term 'existentialist', as opposed to 'existential', to describe al-Sammān's feminist and nationalist concerns. This is based on the distinction made by Stralen in which the term 'existentialist' "refers to the literary-philosophical movement; [while 'existential'] refers to human existence inasmuch as it concerns the fundamental aspects of life." See *ibid.*, note 10, pp. 34-35.

<sup>41</sup> Shukrī (1990), p. 10.

Laylā ‘Usayrān, to name a few. She ascribes her success to this fact. Al-Sammān states in an interview in June 1989:

I am one of the ten best-selling Arab writers. . . . The sales of my books equals in quantity the sales of the renowned Najīb Maḥfouz. . . . Perhaps because I am not restricted to issues related to women’s emancipation. I realise that liberating women in the Third World cannot be achieved without liberating the equally suppressed man. In my writings, I explore the mutual struggle of men and women in the Third World without ignoring the complex and doubled oppression and injustice of which Third World women suffer.<sup>42</sup>

With the articulation of such realisation in her writings, al-Sammān distinguishes herself from other women writers, both *avant-gardes* and the previous generations. Against the background of this awareness, she tackles sensitive issues such as class and gender discrimination, sexuality, and the liberation of women and homeland. She explores such themes in the light of the political situation in the Arab world, particularly in the Levant, hence the inseparability of feminist and nationalist concerns in her works.

Even before the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war, al-Sammān examined feminist themes in the backdrop of the Arab defeat in 1967. This event had a profound impact on Arabic literature of that time. Shukrī states that in her pre-1967 works al-Sammān was roaming between the portrayal of “the sexual revolution of women in a backward closed society and the social revolution of man in an oppressed society.”<sup>43</sup> According to Shukrī, al-Sammān’s collection of short stories *Raḥīl al-Marāfi’ al-Qadīmah* (*Departure of the Ancient Ports*; 1973) marks her first awareness of the

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<sup>42</sup> See Ghādah al-Sammān, *Imra’ah ‘Arabiyyah .. wa Ḥurrah* (*Arab Woman .. and Free*), (Bayrūt: Manshūrāt Ghādah al-Sammān, 2006), p. 97. All references from this book are translated by me. Transliteration of the title, personal names, and places are mine.

<sup>43</sup> Shukrī (1990), p. 101.

connection between women's oppression and the general social and political oppression.

Al-Sammān opens *Departure* with “al-Dānūb al-Ramādī” (“The Gray Danube”) where she clings to the theme of expatriation which she already explored in previous short stories like “Buq‘at Ḍaw’ ‘Alā Masraḥ” (“Spot Light on a Stage”) from *Layl al-Ghurabā’* (*The Foreigners’ Night*; 1966). However, in this short story al-Sammān reaches the apogee of national as well as feminist consciousness. Through her anonymous protagonist she expresses the hypocrisy of Arab society and the heroine’s delusion as she is misled through her “ambition, historical feminist suppression, and the political hypocrisy of [her] leaders”.<sup>44</sup> The heroine is a working bourgeois woman with revolutionary political aspirations. Yet the heroine’s intellectual dependence on her lover, Ḥāzim, prevents her from reaching better awareness. As a radio programme presenter, in June 1967, she announces a false report about the Arab armies’ gradual victory. Accordingly, she leads many Arab soldiers, including her brother and best friend, to attack the enemy with the conviction that they would be supported by other Arab soldiers. Doing so, she becomes “the instrument of the crime”.<sup>45</sup> She is not able to recognise her deceit as she is emotionally affected by Ḥāzim who turns out to be one of the political hypocrites.

The heroine reaches a nationalist awareness as a result of her emotional and political disappointment. While her political frustration is brought about by the 1967 defeat, her emotional dilemma is the result of the hypocrisy and double standards of Ḥāzim. Like many other women of her generation and class, the heroine’s principles,

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<sup>44</sup> Al-Sammān (1992), p. 9.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 12

ambitions, and every detail in her life stem from and are affected by those of her lover. She surrenders to her illusion of Ḥāzim as a revolutionary symbol. Yet the consequences exceed the individual realm to cause a national crisis when he dictates to her the false news about the victory of Arabs. Despite her suspicion, she announces the news out of an absolute belief in him. With such a narration, al-Sammān highlights the necessity of raising Arab women's awareness of national causes and the negative impact of women's dependency on men in the Arab world.

Nevertheless, this story is a clear articulation of the main causes of the defeat. The heroine contemplates: "[m]y homeland consists of a herd of cunning slaughterers and a dull cattle like me . . . our lives in my homeland are futile so long as they conspire with each other against our lives ... even our death there is in vain."<sup>46</sup> Al-Sammān is clear and direct in describing the situation in the Arab world during the 1960s. She laments the death of Arab soldiers and citizens because of the conspiracy of Arab leaders at that time which led to the defeat. For al-Sammān, men like Ḥāzim cause the political and social oppression. After aborting his illegal child, the heroine addresses Ḥāzim: "you do not see the horridness of prostitution unless it is related to a woman's body ... while you prostitute politics, ethics, and all other customs carelessly".<sup>47</sup> While the abortion is a symbol of the 1967 defeat, al-Sammān criticises the concept of honour in Middle Eastern societies where women's so-called honour is more important than the land, which is supposed to represent honour. Out of such criticism, al-Sammān's heroine uses men as well as alcohol to run away from her shock. This is the collapse which wakes her up to the necessity of real struggle to avoid the alienation caused by

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 32

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 36



such emotional and national defeats. The heroine goes back to her country with the intention of fighting against the causes of these defeats – through writing.

Al-Sammān's audacious engagement with such controversial topics and social taboos against the backdrop of national crisis is exemplary and marks a major improvement in her post-1967 works. Al-Sammān's exposition of controversial themes is accompanied by her distinctive application of literary techniques such as stream of consciousness. Robert Humphrey defines stream-of-consciousness fiction as

a type of fiction in which the basic emphasis is placed on exploration of the prespeech levels of consciousness for the purpose, primarily, of revealing the psychic being of the characters. . . . there is no stream-of-consciousness technique. Instead, there are several quite different techniques which are used to present stream of consciousness [such as] direct interior monologue, indirect interior monologue, omniscient description, and soliloquy [in addition to] several special techniques with which a few writers have experimented.<sup>48</sup>

This definition can be applied to al-Sammān's fiction especially the post-1967 works, as illustrated below.

According to Humphrey, it is the 'subject matter' that identifies the stream-of-consciousness novel rather than its techniques, purposes, or themes.<sup>49</sup> The above-mentioned analysis of "The Gray Danube" displays this short story as a stream-of-consciousness fiction since it has at its "essential subject matter the consciousness of one or more characters; that is, the depicted consciousness serves as a screen on which

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<sup>48</sup> Robert Humphrey, *Stream of Consciousness in the Modern Novel*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1954), p. 4, 23. Humphrey identifies "cinematic" devices as some of these secondary techniques, and names few such as montage, multiple-view, slow-ups, fade-outs, cutting, close-ups, panorama, and flash-backs. See Humphrey (1954), p. 49.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

the material in these novels is presented.”<sup>50</sup> As illustrated above, in “The Gray Danube”, nationalist and feminist causes are portrayed through the consciousness of the heroine. This is done through techniques such as interior monologue and flash-back, which is used to narrate the whole story. In her attempt to run away from national and emotional disappointment, the heroine recalls the bitterness of the defeat and Ḥāzim’s hypocrisy while she travels in Europe with a lover. Although her contemplation exemplifies the use of interior monologue in this short story, it is worth mentioning that al-Sammān tends to use the indirect monologue technique rather the direct one. This is obvious in her presence as the omniscient author and her use of description and explanation as methods to present the character’s psyche to the reader by exploring his/her pre-verbal level of consciousness.

Therefore, al-Sammān can be considered exemplary in her exploration of social and political ills in Arab societies while implementing innovative literary techniques such as stream of consciousness. These concerns remain central in almost all her works written after 1967 and especially after 1975, the period to which the quartet under study belongs. For example, in *Beirut Nightmares* al-Sammān vividly employs devices such as “stream of consciousness, flashbacks, flights of fantasy, news briefs and descriptions of the dailiness, the lived reality of the war.”<sup>51</sup> For Cooke, it is the recounting of very small details in a journal format that delineates the routine enforced by war; the dullness and alienation help to emphasise the continuation of life despite the drastic trauma brought by war. Cooke considers this style of writing—in which the author registers such small details in an attempt to capture life’s daily events, even during war—

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>51</sup> Cooke (1988), p. 45.

particularly characteristic of women's literature on war.<sup>52</sup> These devices, however, help to mark al-Sammān as an *avant-garde* writer, for she uses them to reflect national and social crises through themes closely related to human suffering and human nature, and this in turn suggests that she can be classified as an existentialist writer, a classification all but definitively confirmed by her frequent meditations on such traditionally existentialist topics as life, death, alienation, love, injustice, freedom, and discrimination.<sup>53</sup>

The combination of her thematic concerns and literary techniques makes her work highly admired since she started writing in the 1960s. There are a considerable number of studies, theses, and literary criticism that focus on al-Sammān's writings. Different aspects of al-Sammān's works have been scrutinised in studies such as Ghālī Shukrī's *Ghādah al-Sammān without Wings*, Hanan Awwad's *Arab Causes in the Fiction of Ghādah al-Sammān, (1961-1975)*, Ilhām Ghālī's *Ghādah al-Sammān: Love and War*, Najla Ikhtiyar's *Women's Liberation through the Works of Simone De Beauvoir and Ghādah al-Sammān*, and Paola De Kapwa's *Rebellion and Compliance in the Literature of Ghādah al-Sammān*. Besides, her works are examined in other studies dealing with women writers such as 'Afīf Farrāj's *Freedom in Women's Literature*, Joseph Zeidan's *Women Novelists in Modern Arabic Literature and Arab Women Novelists: The Formative Years and Beyond*, and Miriam Cooke's *Women Write War, War's Other Voices and Women and the War Story* to mention only a few.<sup>54</sup> However, until now, the existentialist feature of al-Sammān's works has not been dealt with

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid, pp. 27, 46-47.

<sup>53</sup> See the above-mentioned definition of existentialism by Mahon.

<sup>54</sup> The literary works and studies mentioned here are not exclusive. They are listed chronologically according to the date of its publication.

specifically, although it has been recognised briefly in De Kapwa's, Farrāj's, and Shukrī's studies.<sup>55</sup>

- **AL-SAMMĀN'S LITERARY EXISTENTIALISM**

Al-Sammān's early exposure to Western philosophy and literature helped her to engage with the existentialist trend and to reflect it in her writings. It seems that Western philosophy and literature were available to her through her bourgeois background. Her mother had great influence on her education; she taught her, as a child, French and English so she was able to speak these languages before speaking Arabic.<sup>56</sup> After the death of her mother, her father took the responsibility of cultivating her. Her early education started by memorising the Holy Qur'an. Later, with the help of his circle of intellectual friends, he provided her with world literature and art. At the age of fifteen, al-Sammān, who spoke three languages by then, had read canonical works such as Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, and Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince* to name a few. Also at that young age

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<sup>55</sup> This feature is recognised very briefly by Paola De Kapwa who considers the existentialist aspect of al-Sammān's writings a major trend towards the universality of the writer. She highlights al-Sammān's interest in absurdity through her Master's degree in the Theatre of the Absurd. She links the absurdity in al-Sammān's works to the theme of alienation and the lack of human communication. See Paola De Kapwa, *Rebellion and Compliance in the Literature of Ghadah al-Sammān*, (Bayrūt: Dār al-Ṭalī'ah, 1992), pp. 91-2. Farrāj argues that al-Sammān's third collection of short stories *The Foreigners' Night* is an existentialist work and highlights alienation as its main existentialist characteristic. See 'Afīf Farrāj, *Freedom in Women's Literature*, (Beirut: Institution of Arabic Research, 1980), pp. 84-5. Shukrī argues that al-Sammān's *Nightmares* cannot be considered 'metaphysical novel', if we use de Beauvoir's term which refers to European existentialist or nihilist type of writings which tackles the relationship of man, in essence, with the issue of existence and nihilism. For him, al-Sammān's existentialism is similar to that of Camus'. Yet alienation in Camus' *The Outsider* becomes affiliation in al-Sammān's *Nightmares*. Shukrī's argument remains vague and not applicable to al-Sammān's other works. See Shukrī (1990), p. 179. It is worth mentioning that Joseph Shahwān offers in his diploma thesis a reading of al-Sammān's *Beirut '75* in the light of existentialism. However, Shahwān does not illustrate any of the literary existentialist features of this novel. His reading can be seen as a reflection of his own understanding of the novel, not a literary existentialist analysis of al-Sammān's text. See Shahwān (1982), pp. 197-216.

<sup>56</sup> See Ghadah al-Sammān, *Al-Riwāyah al-Mustaḥīlah (The Impossible Novel)*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Bayrūt: Manshūrāt Ghadah al-Sammān, 1999), p. 44. Translation of all references of this book is mine.

she was acquainted with Sartre's and de Beauvoir's *Les Temps Modernes*, besides reading *The Times* and other Western magazines and newspapers.<sup>57</sup>

This education made al-Sammān an exception in her Damascene generation of the 1950s and 1960s. It opened a new world for her imagination away from her restricted traditional community. Her undergraduate study of English literature and her Master's dissertation about the theatre of the absurd also refined her literary interests. While asserting her rich knowledge of Arabic literature, al-Sammān acknowledges her admiration of Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, James Joyce, Dostoevsky and others.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, she dedicates a volume of her *al-Ā'māl Ghayr al-Kāmilah* (*The Incomplete Works*) to offer a reading of some of the works of Somerset Maugham, Tennessee Williams, Shakespeare, Camus, Chekhov, and André Malraux, among others.<sup>59</sup>

This admiration is reflected in the way her novels recall many famous characters from world literature. For instance, in *Nightmares*, she compares her anonymous protagonist to Lady Macbeth.<sup>60</sup> Al-Sammān also conjures the Messiah in *Nightmares*: while celebrating Christmas, some Lebanese crucify the Messiah again when he refuses to clarify his religion and admits that he is Palestinian. Through such exemplification, al-Sammān refers to the Palestinian dimension of the Lebanese civil war and the unreasonable superficial attitude of the Lebanese aristocracy against the Palestinians.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 373-4.

<sup>58</sup> See Najla Nasīb Ikhtiyar, *Taḥarrur al-Mar'ah 'Abra A'māl Simone De Beauvoir wa Ghādah al-Sammān, 1965-1986* (*Women's Liberation through the Works of Simone De Beauvoir and Ghādah al-Sammān*), (Bayrūt: Dār al-Ṭalī'ah, 1991), p. 10.

<sup>59</sup> See Ghādah al-Sammān, *Mūwāṭṭinah Mutalabisah Bil-qirā'ah* (*A Female Citizen Caught Red-Handed of Reading*), (Bayrūt: Manshūrāt Ghādah al-Sammān, 1986; 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1979).

<sup>60</sup> See al-Sammān (2000), p. 147, 'Kābūs 99'.

<sup>61</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 261-3, 'Kābūs 158'.

Shukrī considers this appropriation of the Messiah similar to the way he is conjured by Fyodor Dostoevsky and Nikos Kazantzakis.<sup>62</sup>

Therefore, being privileged by her bourgeois class, al-Sammān acquired early exposure to world literature and Western writers which—in addition to her distinctive talent and wide-ranging subject matters—contributed significantly to the universal dimension of her writings.<sup>63</sup> However, al-Sammān is far removed from universality, in the sense Chinua Achebe mocks as being of “some distant bend in the road which you may take if you travel out far enough in the direction of Europe or America, if you put adequate distance between yourself and your home.”<sup>64</sup> The impact of Western writers and philosophy on al-Sammān is not at odds with her Arab affiliation (which is expressed in her choice to go back, to live in an Arab country, and to write about issues highly relevant to the Arabs.) She asserts the importance of learning from other cultures and literatures and employing the acquired lore—after the necessary modifications—for the benefit of one’s people and culture.<sup>65</sup> So her national affiliation as an Arab, supported by her openness to other cultures and literatures, provides us with such a universal kind of literature.

This synergy between Western philosophy and the Arab condition and concerns in al-Sammān’s writings emphasises the transcultural feature of her writings rather than

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<sup>62</sup> Shukrī (1990), p. 169.

<sup>63</sup> This universal appeal is exemplified in the fact that some of her works have been translated into thirteen languages: Spanish, German, Albanian, English, Persian, Italian, Bulgarian, Polish, Russian, Romanian, Chinese, French and Yugoslavian. In addition to the fact that her works have been studied by many non-Arab scholars like Paola De Kapwa (Italian), Mineke Schipper (Dutch) as well as by English and American scholars like Miriam Cooke, as mentioned above.

<sup>64</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays 1965-87*, (London: Heinemann, 1988), p. 52

<sup>65</sup> Ghādah al-Sammān, *Tasakku’un Dakhila Jurḥin (Loitering Inside a Wound)*, (Bayrūt: Manshūrāt Ghādah al-Sammān, 1988), p. 130.

an inherent hybridity between Western and Eastern literatures.<sup>66</sup> Therefore, this transculturation in al-Sammān's literary production stems mostly from her knowledge of Western philosophy and literature as a bourgeoisie in a traditional Damascene society. Al-Sammān's settings and characters are all drawn from the Arab world, especially Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine. In this sense, al-Sammān's literary production might be considered to be more transcultural than hybrid. The concept of hybridity, as illustrated by Robert Young, develops from writers' tendency to represent the 'otherness' in an attempt to mask the 'uncertainty' about their identity. Young describes this attitude as "sick with desire for the other"<sup>67</sup> which results in some novelists' obsessive writing "about the uncertain crossing and invasion of identities: whether of class and gender . . . or culture and race."<sup>68</sup> This type of hybridity is not valid for al-Sammān's writings, and especially the quartet under study. None of her main characters can be seen in the light of this obsessive desire for the other; the other being rich, Western, and male. The various identities (gender, national, racial, and class) of her characters are portrayed quite clearly. Therefore, the impact of Western culture and literature on al-Sammān does not seem to transcend the transcultural effect.

The previous examination of the stream of consciousness technique in al-Sammān's work can be further explored in order to highlight the impact of Western literature on her writings. For instance, another characteristic of indirect monologue as implemented by al-Sammān is the combination of indirect interior monologue with

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<sup>66</sup> For more information about the concepts of Hybridity, Synergy, Transculturation, and Universality as applied in this thesis see Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (Ed.), *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, (London: Routledge, 2003, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 2000), pp. 118-121, 229, 233-4, 235-7.

<sup>67</sup> For more information see Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 2.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

another stream of consciousness technique; direct interior monologue. In his study of the devices used in the stream-of-consciousness novel, Humphrey identifies this combination of techniques as “especially suitable and natural, for the author who uses indirect monologue may see fit to drop out of the scene for a length of time, after he has introduced the reader to the character’s mind with enough additional remarks for them to proceed smoothly together.”<sup>69</sup> It is very interesting that Humphrey recognises this method to be implemented “notably” in Virginia Woolf’s work. This may point to the impact of Western literature on al-Sammān.

Humphrey illustrates how Woolf’s main characters in her three stream-of-consciousness novels, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To The Lighthouse*, and *The Waves*,

all have moments of vision. Not that they are disciplined mystics who have prepared themselves for this, but their creator believed that the important thing in human life is the search the individual constantly has for meaning and identification. The fulfillment of her characters is therefore achieved when Virginia Woolf feels they are ready to receive the vision. The novels are a record of their preparations for the final insight. The preparations are in the form of fleeting insights into other characters and syntheses of present and past private symbols.<sup>70</sup>

Woolf’s representation of her characters’ visions and insights as means of reflecting their consciousness in fiction is adopted by al-Sammān. In *Departure*, Nof, the protagonist of “Ḥarīq Dhalika al-Ṣayf” (“The Fire of that Summer,”) and the heroine of “The Gray Danube” both go through this human search for identity after the defeat of 1967. In these two short stories, the reader is exposed to the flow of the characters’ consciousness until they reach their ‘final insights’. The heroine of “The Gray Danube”,

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<sup>69</sup> Humphrey (1954), p. 30.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 13.



realises finally that she has to take part in the national struggle and return home. Nof, who lost hope after the defeat, reaches a similar realisation of the necessity of participating in national struggle. This final insight is presented to the reader at the end of the story when her burning pain disappears and she decides not to go back to the cemetery where the preparations for this insight took place.

In the context of this chapter, I will give special attention to the impact of existentialist literature on al-Sammān as exemplified here by the literary works of de Beauvoir and Sartre. To illustrate briefly the affect of de Beauvoir's existentialism on al-Sammān's, a parallel can be drawn between the female characters in al-Sammān's early works and de Beauvoir's H         of *The Blood of Others*. This novel by de Beauvoir was written during 1943 and 1944, the worst years of World War II, and published in 1945. De Beauvoir sets the Spanish civil war as the backdrop of her novel which is considered a resistance and existentialist novel.<sup>71</sup> H        , the main female character, is portrayed as "competent, hard working, talented, and capable . . . of brave and determined action, but [she does] not possess the same capacities for coherence and the systematization of the social world as the men with whom [she is] associated."<sup>72</sup> This situation makes her dependent on men around her. Hence, "her story cannot be told in its essential details without constant reference to another named human being".<sup>73</sup> In this sense, these men, whether Paul, her boyfriend, or Blomart, his comrade, receive her actions as childish and irresponsible.

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<sup>71</sup> See Mahon (1997), p. 18.

<sup>72</sup> Mary Evans, *Simone De Beauvoir: A Feminist Mandarin*, (London and New York: Tavistock Publications Ltd, 1985), p. 96.

<sup>73</sup> Mahon (1997), p. 33.

Hélène meets Blomart through Paul. Blomart comes from a bourgeois background from which he feels alienated. He joins the French Communist Party where workers find it hard to treat him equally because of his bourgeois background. He leaves the Communist Party and becomes an active trade unionist. Hélène falls in love with Blomart who rejects her. She tries to prove to him that she can be his equal. At different stages in the novel, they have existentialist discussions and arguments where they discuss themes of death, responsibility, and finding good purposes within life. While Blomart tries to conquer his alienation through his work and political affiliation, Hélène attempts to ally her alienation and inferiority to Blomart and Paul through her discussions with and challenges to Blomart. This childish attitude develops into more serious actions when she joins the Resistance. She is seriously injured in one mission. The novel, which opens with Blomart keeping a vigil besides Hélène's bed, closes with him contemplating her death and their unfulfilled love.

Hélène's political action, though it seems a reaction to the trade deal she was supposed to have with the German client Herr Bergmann, revolves around Blomart because she wants to be involved in the resistance like him. Hélène attempts to find meaning for her life through being involved with Blomart, who represents what she lacks in terms of responsibility and commitment. This recalls the way in which al-Sammān's female protagonists are portrayed in her early works such as "Another Cold Night" and "Spot Light on a Stage" from *The Foreigners' Night* and "The Gray Danube" from *Departure*. These three heroines (Fāṭimah, Mādo, and the anonymous protagonist of "The Gray Danube") are portrayed similarly in the way they seek reasons for their existence through their emotional relationships. They only become aware of

national allegiance after an emotional disappointment—usually caused by a revolutionary lover. This similarity in al-Sammān’s portrayal of her female characters recalls de Beauvoir’s general pattern in fiction as observed by Mary Evans “in which women stay much the same (in the sense that some of the female characters appear over and over again in different novels under different names) while the men become increasingly morally unattractive and unsympathetic.”<sup>74</sup>

This style of writing is prevalent in al-Sammān’s early works. First, al-Sammān’s male characters fall into this pattern. She keeps using the name Ḥāzim for her revolutionary defeated and/or hypocrite male characters. They seem similar in the way they exercise power over her female characters. Hence the reader grows more sympathetic with the female protagonists and less affected by the indifference and deceit of male characters. Secondly, al-Sammān’s female protagonists derive their national allegiance from their lovers. Their national awakening ensues from their emotional and political frustration. The solution in these cases is returning home and/or participating in the struggle. Although Fāṭimah of “Another Cold Night” is portrayed slightly differently (especially in her search to find meaning of her life first through political affiliation and then through an emotional relationship), these three examples illustrate al-Sammān’s repetitive employment of similar characters in different works.

This attitude of re-creating the same characters over and over again can be seen as one of the impacts of Western literature, particularly de Beauvoir’s, on al-Sammān. However, this characteristic is absent from al-Sammān’s later fiction. She develops different types of female characters such as those portrayed in the quartet. For instance,

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<sup>74</sup> Evans (1985), p. 78.

the character of Yasmīnah of *Beirut '75* is in no way similar to Samīrah of *Masquerade*—the first is deluded by materialist and sexual pleasures and totally dependant on her lover while the latter is assertive, confident, and independent. In *The First Billion*, al-Sammān gives two examples of defeated revolutionary women—Layla and Dunya—yet she portrays them differently. Layla challenges the patriarchal and political powers which repeatedly defeat her while Dunya surrenders to these powers since her struggle against them is only temporary. I view this as a significant change in al-Sammān's portrayal of existentialist characters—indeed I see it as an improvement—and will discuss it in greater depth in the next chapter.

Another interesting example of the impact of existentialist literature on al-Sammān is the way in which *Nightmares* evokes Sartre's famous maxim, 'Hell is other people' from his play *No Exit*. The anonymous protagonist repeats this sentence at the beginning of numerous 'Nightmares' when she is trapped with Amīn after the death of his father and the cook. Throughout the novel, al-Sammān highlights the difference between the protagonist and Amīn: the protagonist looks upon Amīn "as someone who, in his heart of hearts, was nothing but a stereotypical 'Eastern girl' whose mental capacities had been put on hold. And he in turn [sees her] as the female version of a Western young man who'd cut himself loose from all the traditions that he (Amīn) most revered."<sup>75</sup> The protagonist and Amīn were imprisoned together in one remote corner of the latter's flat. Any communication between them seemed as a torture for both of them since they were completely different from each other. This evokes the image of Sartre's three characters in *No Exit* who were imprisoned together in one room in hell with no

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<sup>75</sup> Al-Sammān (1997), p. 281.

windows, no mirrors, and only one door. The three characters realise that their hell is to torture each other. They do so by investigating each other's sins, desires, and memories. Al-Sammān's evocation of this image is powerful and embodies the inspiration of Sartre's ironic existentialism.<sup>76</sup>

In the same way that Sartre's and de Beauvoir's fame "will always be linked in people's minds with the Resistance",<sup>77</sup> al-Sammān's fame will always be linked with the Arab defeat of 1967 and the Lebanese civil war. Cranston considers the "main philosophical argument of [*The Blood of Others*] is first, that freedom is the supreme value in life; and second, that it demands great courage to be a free man."<sup>78</sup> Al-Sammān highlights this fact in her pre- and post-1967 works, where her calls for justice and love are encompassed within her cry for freedom. These features underline, to an extent, how al-Sammān is influenced by de Beauvoir's and Sartre's literary existentialism.

Al-Sammān does not declare a direct interest in existentialism. According to Macquarrie, the existentialism of a novelist could arise "independently of the formal philosophical inquiry".<sup>79</sup> In this sense, I consider the impact of Western literature, especially Sartre's and de Beauvoir's, on al-Sammān as an essential factor in her early literary productions which reveal an indirect interest in existentialism. This 'indirect interest', however, develops in her post-1975 works where she amplifies and extends the traditional conception of existentialism by deploying it as a means of exploring Arab feminism and nationalism, as discussed in the following chapter.

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<sup>76</sup> For a brief reference to this example see Shukrī (1990), p. 169.

<sup>77</sup> Cranston, 'Simone de Beauvoir', p. 172.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 173.

<sup>79</sup> Macquarrie (1985), p. 257.

Now, after a creative life spanning almost forty five years, al-Sammān and her writing can be analysed in the light of existentialist literature. Stralen states that

after the delineation of historically limited conventions, one can still point out existentialist themes and viewpoints at other moments in literary history, but these can no longer be considered dominant. [Thus we can allow the works of some writers] a status that it did not attain at the time; in short, we judge their work differently from their contemporaries.<sup>80</sup>

In this sense, I would like to propose a new and different approach in examining al-Sammān's works, taking into consideration that, although she is influenced by the literary existentialism of Sartre, de Beauvoir, Camus and others,<sup>81</sup> she does not belong to the demarcated literary existentialist movement of the West.

Moreover, Stralen considers "literary existentialism, in the first place, as a movement which can be understood by way of existential phenomenology. Furthermore, this is about a type of literature which is closely connected with World War II, a phenomenon that must be understood in the broad sense of the word."<sup>82</sup> In this study, a broader sense of this definition will be considered. There is clearly a huge difference in the geographical and cultural settings of al-Sammān's works and Western Europe out of which Stralen's study arises. Thus, I will attempt to analyse al-Sammān's works in the light of the broader interpretation of existentialist literature. Al-Sammān's quartet will be examined as a form of 'universalistic existentialist literature'. By definition, in this type of literature

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<sup>80</sup> See Stralen (2005), note 37, p. 55.

<sup>81</sup> See Farrāj (1980), p. 84.

<sup>82</sup> Stralen (2005), p. 56.

great human themes, such as love and death, the absurdity and futility of life are reflected in a concrete way. This interpretation is rather noncommittal. . . . It is a description that could apply, in a manner speaking, to many moments in literary history. [It] could rather be considered a *style of writing* instead of a movement connected to historical frames.<sup>83</sup>

Al-Sammān's writings tackle themes of love and death, absurdity and futility which reflect the critical political and social times in which these works are written as I shall discuss in the following section. This fact allows her work to be considered as part of this 'universalistic existentialist literature' or 'style of writing' as Stralen names it. Al-Sammān also employs certain literary existentialist characteristics in her writings. For example, her choice of 'the novel' as the major genre of her writings is one of such example.<sup>84</sup> Other characteristics are "the confrontation with the other and the battle for authenticity, [and] the frequent use of dialogues".<sup>85</sup> These characteristics will be discussed in more detail in the following section, drawing on examples from al-Sammān's quartet.

- **EXISTENTIALIST FEATURES OF AL-SAMMĀN'S QUARTET**

According to Stralen, existentialist literature "bears witness to a crisis of values"<sup>86</sup> that could manifest "itself in the literary work as a process of moving from ambivalence to indifference. . . . Thus literature since Balzac, up to and including Robbe-Grillet, shows a tendency towards problematization, reduction and destruction of

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>84</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 84 where he states that "the existentialist author appears to expect more salvation from the theatre and the novel, in which the accent falls on the actions and the dialogues." Though he considers drama as the "genre that does most justice to" the dialogue, he sets 'the novel' as a genre which manifests the frequent use of dialogue as an existentialist genre. Al-Sammān occasionally writes plays, however, limitations prevent me from discussing any of her plays as part of her existentialist works.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

the traditional subject and the identity connected to it.”<sup>87</sup> Some of al-Sammān’s characters embody this ‘crisis of values’; Farah, Yasmīnah, and Khalīl go through this process from ‘ambivalence to indifference’. In the case of these three characters, however, this process leads to realisation and action. Furthermore, al-Sammān’s characters are not traditional, and neither is the way she develops her narrative. The tragic end of her five main characters in *Beirut ’75* is shockingly controversial. The experimental narrative structure of *Nightmares* is destructive and challenging to the traditional literary conventions of the Arabic novel.

The abandonment of traditional character and subject matter is one of the main characteristics of al-Sammān’s works. Her adoption of existentialism can be viewed as another example of her eschewing normal or customary characters and topics. Her early rebellion against the traditional Damascene society expands to reflect rebellion against any kind of injustice in her works. Setting the war as a backdrop to her novels, she moves away from traditional thematic concerns of women writers of her generation to discussions of anxiety, dread, awareness of death, and most importantly, freedom. Needless to say, these concerns are also characteristically associated with existentialism.

As an example of al-Sammān’s existentialist thematic concerns, I will examine briefly the theme of death which is prevalent throughout her quartet. In *Beirut ’75*, four of al-Sammān’s five main characters die tragically. Although the protagonist of *Nightmares* survives the siege and the sniper’s bullets, the nightmarish atmosphere of the novel is dominated by intangible death, mainly the death of freedom and love in

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., pp. 57-8.



Beirut. Furthermore, in *Nightmares*, death is personalised: Mr. Death appears as an old man who meets a little boy who is cold and hungry so he leans on Old Man Death's shoulders while the latter tells him how tired he is of working in Beirut. Through the character of Old Man Death, al-Sammān depicts the absurdist reality of death during the civil war in Beirut.<sup>88</sup> This is another existentialist characteristic of *Nightmares*.

*The First Billion* closes with the death of Raghīd, Layla, and Bassām. Finally in *Masquerade*, besides the death of 'Abdul Karīm and Nājī, al-Sammān names several sections at the heart of the novel with 'death' as its sub-titles. The persistence of 'death' is presented in absurdist atmospheres such as 'Adnān's nightmare in which he predicts the death of his friend 'Abdul Karīm, both the dream and the action happen during a thunder storm. The artist, Sa'īd, also sees nightmares in which he kills people and hangs in his victims' necks a dead rat, only to discover in the morning that these people were truly killed in the same way he visualised in his sleep.

Following on from the previous argument regarding aesthetic and ethical literary existentialism, Stralen observes that in "aesthetic literary existentialism, the accent is on the present, otherwise there is the tendency to regress. In ethical literary existentialism, however, the accent is on the progression."<sup>89</sup> This is reflected in Sartre's and Camus' fictional works. In Sartre's, the narrative develops towards the future while in Camus' the narrative revolves around present situations which creates the absurdist atmosphere. Hence Camus is mainly concerned with "the moment" and his characters are introduced to the reader only from the "outside".

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<sup>88</sup> See al-Sammān (1997), pp. 192-211.

<sup>89</sup> Stralen (2005), p. 74.

In a sense, al-Sammān expresses a combination of both trends. In her quartet she focuses on the Lebanese civil war as the ‘present situation’ especially in her first two novels, *Beirut '75* and *Nightmares*. In *Beirut '75*, the story develops around class discrimination and social and political injustice, and moves towards the breakout of the civil war, which can be seen as ‘the future’ in the context of this work. Besides, the Lebanese’ indifference towards the Israeli air raids and their refusal to acknowledge the danger and take action against it, mark the ethical side of the novel. In *Nightmares*, however, the situation is different: the civil war has already started. Al-Sammān portrays the war’s atrocity in nightmarish and absurdist atmosphere. She represents an ‘irreparable’ situation through which (some) Lebanese “can only try to learn to live.”<sup>90</sup> There are numerous examples from *Nightmares* on this idea. For instance, children toys become mainly guns; the doctor who, struck by the daily scenes of tortured bodies, decides to work as a sniper out of fear of being killed by one.<sup>91</sup> This desire to accept the negativity brought by the war and attempt to live through it recalls Camus’ approach where ‘reality cannot be changed’, hence the ‘irreparability’ of the situation. This justifies the absurdist atmosphere of *Nightmares* and emphasises this novel as an aesthetic literary existentialist text. Therefore, in her quartet, al-Sammān seems to wander between ethical and aesthetic trends of existentialist thought.

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<sup>90</sup> See *ibid.*, note 62, p. 74. I stress ‘some Lebanese’ because al-Sammān in *Nightmares*, besides depicting the attempts of the Lebanese to live through the war, she also portrays the indifference of ‘some’ Lebanese towards the atrocity of the civil strife. An obvious example is Salwā, the young lady, who asks the protagonist to help her to join a ‘folk-dancing troupe’ while the protagonist is trapped in her house because of the ragging Hotels Battles outside. See al-Sammān (1997), pp. 44-45. Cooke considers this example an illustration of the opportunities provided by war for the emergence of some new bourgeois social values. See Cooke (1988), pp. 113-14.

<sup>91</sup> See al-Sammān (2000), pp. 55-6, ‘Kābūs 47’ & pp. 68-9, ‘Kābūs 55’. These two ‘Nightmares’ are not translated into English in the 1997 translation by Nancy N. Roberts.

Here, however, I would like to examine a few of the more important examples of Stralen's specific existentialist motives found in al-Sammān's quartet. The first motive is 'the *authentic outsider*' who could be a thief, a whore, or a vagrant who "escaped the bourgeois, essential morale."<sup>92</sup> Almost none of al-Sammān's characters, especially in her quartet, could be considered as an 'authentic outsider'. Her characters are mostly middle-class intellectuals, artists, or humanists who suffer from the double-standards and hypocrisy of the bourgeois. However, Muṣṭafā the poor fisherman in *Beirut '75*, can be seen as an 'authentic outsider'. He witnesses the miserable situation of his father and other poor fishermen who are exploited by bourgeois monopolisers like Nimr al-Skīnī and Fāḍil al-Salmounī. He is portrayed as a passive character who is incapable of any action apart from writing poetry. Yet poverty and exploitation turn him into a revolutionary character who organises the fishermen's opposition against the bourgeois monopolisers. Thus, al-Sammān implements this motive of 'the authentic outsider' yet briefly, without much emphasis.

The second motive is the *enclosed space*. According to Stralen, in literary existentialist texts there is a "frequent mention of the role of doors and rooms" which demarcate a limited area where

the individual is forced into confrontation with the other or into discussion with himself. In the enclosed space, man is often reduced to his body and thus subjected to the gaze, the power of the other. At the same time, the subordinate realizes that he can or should escape this subjection to power, after which the fight with the other can commence.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Stralen (2005), p. 85.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

This existentialist motive can be seen as operative in most of al-Sammān's works. In *Beirut '75*, Yasmīnah's monologues take place in Nimr's flat in stormy nights where all the windows are closed. She is worried about her predicament: Nimr is ignoring her love and refusing to marry her because she has a sexual relationship with him out of marriage.<sup>94</sup> Through these monologues Yasmīnah becomes aware of her subordination to the other, Nimr. She wishes to break out of his control. This is expressed in the scene when Nimr enters his flat and finds all windows open, with Yasmīnah standing in front of one window, telling him that the turtle "discovered its wings and flew away".<sup>95</sup> While the turtle symbolises Yasmīnah,<sup>96</sup> opening the windows is a symbol of Yasmīnah's intention to break out of this enclosed space which witnesses her suffering. Yasmīnah's longing for freedom becomes true only to cause her tragic death towards the end of the novel.

In *Nightmares*, all the incidents, which are told from the protagonist's point of view, happen in the enclosed space of the house in which she is trapped. The narrative starts in her flat then moves to her neighbour's. The novel is busy with monologues and nightmarish contemplations. The house is literally closed from the outside world. The protagonist says: "I didn't know that . . . the moment I closed the door behind me I was also shutting myself off from life and hope on the other side. I'd become the prisoner of a nightmare that was to drag on and on ...".<sup>97</sup> She becomes a prisoner by the threat of the snipers located in opposite buildings. The protagonist is eager to leave the confinement of the house and save her life; she tries to leave the house a few times

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<sup>94</sup> Al-Sammān (1995), pp. 51-56.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>96</sup> See Homsī Vinson, 'A Writer of Many Layers', p. 2.

<sup>97</sup> Al-Sammān (1997), p. 3.

before she finally succeeds. She, however, withdraws to silence and converse to the other three male characters only when necessary. Her contemplations and ‘discussions with herself’ happen in the enclosed space of that house.

*The First Billion* opens with Khalīl in his car with his family trying to get to the airport in an escape from his opponents who are trying to assassinate him for his political beliefs. Khalīl’s opening monologue expressing his fear, anxiety, and deep frustration with the political situation in Beirut, takes place in the ‘enclosed space’ of the car. Then the space becomes the airport hall till Khalīl and his family move to the first class compartment in the aeroplane. All these spaces witness Khalīl’s ‘discussion with himself’. He is not ‘confronting with the other’. In fact, he is escaping the other by being enclosed within himself in this ‘enclosed space’. He submits to the ‘gaze of the other’, his wife, yet protects himself by retiring within himself, like the protagonist of *Nightmares*.

In *The First Billion*, Raghīd’s palace is another ‘enclosed space’ which witnesses the inner monologues of the servant Nasīm and the astrologer Waṭfān among other characters. The palace is very well protected by several security doors, walls, gates, and windows, which are always closed. Within the palace there is the golden swimming pool which can be seen as another enclosed space within the enclosed palace. In this space critical confrontations happen—for example, Raghīd’s confrontational conversation with Amīr in which he tries to humiliate the latter. He shows Amīr a sculpture of Abdul Nāṣer made by Amīr’s father. The sculpture is a symbol of freedom and justice to radical thinkers like Amīr. In this confrontation, Raghīd tries to prove that he is in power by possessing this sculpture.

Another confrontation happens in this space between Khalīl and Raghīd, the poles apart of the novel. Raghīd tries to humiliate Khalīl and prove to him that his national affiliation is hopeless. In this confrontation Raghīd dies of a heart attack. One last character who is subordinate to Raghīd in this space, is Nasīm. Being trapped in that enclosed palace, Nasīm is subject to Raghīd's powerful gaze and control. At the same time he witnesses the cruelty of Raghīd and wishes to kill him. He never does so, however, out of fear of losing his job which feeds his family back in Lebanon, and perhaps his life also. Still, Nasīm's sympathy and help to Baḥriyyah can be seen as an indirect reaction against Raghīd.

The third existentialist motive according to Stralen is the *existential misunderstanding*. This misunderstanding takes place when

in his search for authenticity, man becomes entangled in handed-down essentials. [This misunderstanding] plays an important role especially in aesthetic existentialism, because, after all, here the limited human freedom and the limited overview of reality connected to this, is a more clearly expressed theme than in ethical existentialism. [It implies] the irrevocable and tragic contradiction between intent and effect. [This] existential misunderstanding, in contrast to ordinary misunderstanding, was primarily unforeseeable and . . . its consequences cannot be restored by a simple conversation or a simple action. In that sense this misunderstanding is in principle inevitable.<sup>98</sup>

This third motive is clear in the character of Dunya from *The First Billion*. Her 'unforeseeable' tragic end is the result of her involvement in her husband's materialist interests and ignoring her talent and revolutionary principles. She finds herself in an irrevocable situation where she is part of a social class to which she does not belong originally. As a result of her marriage to Nadīm and his indulgent materialism, she loses

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<sup>98</sup> Stralen (2005), p. 87.

her skill in painting. Her situation is very paradoxical: she is torn between going back to the kind of life she had as a young artist and the easy extravagant life she has with Nadīm. She is lost and finds herself unable to decide what to do. Her attempts to save herself through confronting Nadīm in brief conversations and joining one demonstration to condemn the Israeli invasion of Lebanon can be seen as simple conversation and action. Thus, her misunderstanding of her situation led to her dilemma and her simple actions do not help in retrieving her previous revolutionary self.

The fourth literary existentialist motive is the *negative/absent* action which

concerns the non-performance of an action where one could or might reasonably expect one. This is not about a simple omission, a form of passivity nor about forgetfulness, but about a conscious intent. We often see a negative action at the moment that the limit situation makes its entry in the life of the character and when he/she – in terms of existentialism – refuses to face up to the seriousness of the situation or declines to confront the altered circumstances adequately.<sup>99</sup>

An example about this motive is Farah in *Beirut* '75. He is controlled by the other, Nīshān, by whom he is made a successful celebrity but at the same time subjugated into sex tool. He does not try to confront Nīshān or even escape him; he resents him secretly. In a way, al-Sammān gives the reader the impression that Nīshān's attitude in the business of making stars is against Farah's morality. This situation drives Farah to what the outside community considers as madness. However, for Farah, that was almost the most honest part of his life in Beirut.

This negative attitude is notable in the character of Amīn in *Nightmares*. Amīn surrenders to the life offered to him by his father and refuses to take any action to

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

escape his father's house where he was trapped during the notorious Hotels Battles. While the anonymous protagonist is conscious of the danger and trying all possible ways to escape the dreadful situation, Amīn directs his anger in an endless fight against the flies, mice, and cockroaches.<sup>100</sup> In Amīn's situation, the negative attitude becomes his way of life where his engagement with his father's principles "ends in acceptance or resentment and where not making a choice is chosen as a way of life."<sup>101</sup>

Khalīl in *The First Billion* remains totally negative about Kafā's unreasonable decisions and actions in her trials to belong to the wealthy Arab community in Geneva. He does nothing to stop her cheating on him with Nadīm or the Italian man she picks from the coffee shop. In this example, Khalīl's "negative action thus concerns the fact of purposely not executing an act, or the prolongation of an action or attitude where this is considered undesirable."<sup>102</sup> He also remains totally obedient to Saqr's whims. He does nothing to stop the latter's addiction to cocaine until Amīr interferes and asks him to do so. He does not interfere to stop Saqr raping his girlfriend while high from cocaine. This attitude can be seen as an "apathetic stand with regard to the oppressive situation."<sup>103</sup>

Khalīl's negativity contradicts with his patriotism and human principles. Even at the end, he lets Raghīd drown in his swimming pool without any reaction whatsoever. This case might be understandable as Raghīd, 'the other', is the source of his troubled life in Geneva but the absence of his reaction remains questionable. In a way, this leads us to Stralen's argument that "the semantic field of 'the other' is undoubtedly the

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<sup>100</sup> Al-Sammān (1997), pp. 145, 188.

<sup>101</sup> Stralen (2005), p. 89.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 88.



central topic in existentialist literature.”<sup>104</sup> In this case, Raghīd is in control of all the characters in the novel and becomes central to any of these characters’ dilemma including Khalīl’s absent action.

Bassām is another example from *The First Billion* of the motive of the *negative/absent* action. When the civil war broke out in Lebanon, he fled Beirut with the excuse of writing a PhD thesis at Cambridge University. He, however, does not finish it: his thesis is his excuse to escape the hard decision of whether to go back to Beirut or to remain in exile. According to Amīr, Bassām is “running away from everything. Never once [has he] slapped life in the face with a single solid decision.”<sup>105</sup> His character expresses the “wish for aloofness, then, does not so much point to a lack of interest, but a wish not to be contaminated by the bourgeois ethics.”<sup>106</sup> The fact that he chooses to stay with Amīr reflects his inner desire of being active like the latter. However, he has to overcome his fears and disappointments at what has become of his homeland. This in a way expresses his ‘desire for authenticity’, authenticity with regard to honest struggle against one enemy, be it the Israelis or the corrupt bourgeoisie who have an interest in the persistence of the war.

Finally, one of the typical literary existentialist procedures is the transmission of signals “by means of the text which transcend the edges of the book . . . and reach the conscience of the reader”<sup>107</sup> to urge him/her to react or rebel against a negative situation such as social injustice. In this sense, the abovementioned “phenomenon of

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>105</sup> Al-Sammān (2005), p. 181.

<sup>106</sup> Stralen (2005), p. 89.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

‘engagement’ can therefore be connected to the author, the reader and the text.”<sup>108</sup> We find this type of connection in al-Sammān’s quartet. Her depiction of the ills of society expresses many readers’ anxieties, fears, and problems. In this way she creates a certain connection with the reader. She states that “the writer is the offspring of his/her surroundings and time. However, he/she is also the offspring of dream, reality, justice, and freedom which values do not decay.”<sup>109</sup> Al-Sammān remains faithful to these existentialist values through her writings. Since the text addresses the readers’ problematic issues, the readers identify with her existentialist literary text. This is best illustrated by the fact that she is one of the best-selling writers in the Arab world. Thus the abovementioned link between ‘author, reader, and text’ which features a literary existentialist text is valid in al-Sammān’s literary works.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this chapter I have argued that al-Sammān is a writer who engages with literary existentialist themes and aesthetics. In the first part of this chapter, I present a general overview of existentialism as a philosophical and literary movement. Then I provide brief account of ethical and aesthetic strands of ‘existential’ thought. This is followed by an examination of Stralen’s three existentialist semantic topoi: the limit situation, the other, and engagement.

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>109</sup> Al-Sammān (2006), p. 10.

In the second part of this chapter, I examine briefly some of al-Sammān's pre-1975 works which illustrate the wide range of her existentialist thematic concerns—as early as the period following the 1967 Arab defeat by Israel—and the employment of the stream of consciousness technique in these works. I also shed light on the impact of Western culture and literature, especially existentialist, on her literary production and identify it as transculturation to the contrary of hybridity. Although al-Sammān has not studied existentialist philosophy, the indirect effects of the writings of Sartre, Camus, and de Beauvoir, among others, are clear in her writings. This is explained through my reading of the examples of existentialist characteristics in her works cited in this chapter. These examples illustrate the ethical and aesthetic features of her existentialist writings. Some other examples are further used to demonstrate al-Sammān's implementation of some existentialist motives such as the *authentic outsider*, the *enclosed space*, the *existential misunderstanding*, the *negative/absent* action, and the 'engagement' which connects the author, the reader, and the text.

The chapter provides the necessary background against which al-Sammān's innovative exploration of Arab feminist and nationalist concerns are shown to engage with a literary existentialist mode, especially in her quartet.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **BEYOND TRADITION: AL-SAMMĀN'S EXISTENTIALIST ARAB FEMINISM AND NATIONALISM**

Following on from the presentation of al-Sammān's engagement with literary existentialist themes and aesthetics, in this chapter I propose a new understanding of the ideological and aesthetic implications of Western existentialism. I argue that al-Sammān introduces new strands of literary existential thought which are highly relevant to Arabic culture and literature. In this way, al-Sammān's engagement with literary existentialism is far from being considered merely a reflection of Western existentialism; it is, rather, a manifestation of the pertinence of literary existentialism to Arabic literature through employing themes and motives derived from the ordinary reality of Arabs' lives. Therefore, in this chapter I examine al-Sammān's presentation of Arab feminist and nationalist concerns through her avant-garde employment of existential thought and techniques.

#### **EXISTENTIALIST ARAB FEMINISM**

I designate the first part of this chapter to explore Arab feminism as illustrated in al-Sammān's works. Therefore, I will provide in the first section an account of the

feminist aspects of al-Sammān's writings in general, highlighting her depiction of feminist causes in the Arab world, especially Lebanon. I will follow this with an examination of her employment of literary existentialist techniques while also exploring feminist issues in her quartet.

- **AL-SAMMĀN'S FEMINISM**

Al-Samman identifies with feminism, and claims that "every rational Arab woman" is a feminist.<sup>1</sup> She, however, calls for comprehensive freedom that transcends women's freedom to include all people and all aspects of Arab life. With such an attitude she distinguishes herself from other Arab women writers who limit their feminist discourse to liberating women. She refuses to label her literature as "women's literature" (*adab nisā'ī*) and states that this term is used in Arab societies to indicate a "less important literature than literature written by the men of the tribe."<sup>2</sup> Hence, she claims that "there will always be 'women's literature' as long as there is 'male criticism'."<sup>3</sup> This view is emphasised by Shukrī who classifies al-Sammān's writings within modern Arabic literature and associates it with the writings of male writers such as Najīb Maḥfouz, Yūsif Idrīs, Ḥannā Mīna, Ghassān Kanafānī and others, whose literature is seen as transcending gendered affiliation.<sup>4</sup>

As an Arab woman writer, al-Sammān has to endure two kinds of metaphoric 'terroristic criticism' (*Irhāb Naqdī*).<sup>5</sup> On the one hand, she is criticised by some Arab male writers and critics of writing less important literature for the mere choice of her

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<sup>1</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>3</sup> Al-Sammān (1988), p. 156.

<sup>4</sup> See Shukrī (1990), p. 102.

<sup>5</sup> Al-Sammān (2006), p. 49.

main character(s) as female(s). On the other hand, some Arab female writers and critics accuse her of disdaining Arab women's problems and of distinguishing herself by not devoting her works completely to women's issues. As a result of the latter criticism she is accused of writing literature similar to that written by men.<sup>6</sup> On this topic, Cooke states that like "the literature of a colonized people, women's writings have occupied a separate space that was not deemed worthy of consideration, except when it used the colonizer's language, and thus evaded its own particularism."<sup>7</sup> This attitude towards women's writings in Arab societies is underlined by Shirin Abu al-Najā in her study of the position of Arab women's writings within the general patriarchal Arab context, she realises that "patriarchal society has not changed its perception of women. When she writes, she is still the *living creature* who is expected to devote her text for the prevalent themes."<sup>8</sup> According to Abu al-Najā, patriarchal societies deny women writers the right of creativity.

Al-Sammān agrees with Abu al-Najā in this regard and stresses that women's writings should not be labelled according to their thematic concerns since women can be as creative as men in their literary expressions.<sup>9</sup> Rather, women's and men's writings should be examined together as equally participating in the creation of a holistic cultural context since writing "defines and shapes the consciousness of an individual, but also of

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<sup>6</sup> Al-Sammān wrote an article entitled: "Terroristic Criticism" ("Al-'Irhāb al-Naqdī") in response to an article by Bouthainah Sha'bān in which the latter accused al-Sammān of disdaining Arab women's literature by refusing to identify her writings as 'women's literature'. See al-Sammān (2006), pp. 49-55.

<sup>7</sup> Cooke (1988), p. 85.

<sup>8</sup> Shirin Abu al-Najā, *Maḥmūd al-Waṭan fī Fikr al-Kātibah al-'Arabiyyah (The Concept of Homeland in the Intellectual View of Arab Women Writers)*, (Bayrūt: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥdah al-'Arabiyyah, 2003), p. 15. Translation of title and quotation is mine. Emphasis is mine. It is interesting that in the original text, Abu al-Najā uses the word (al-kā'in) to refer to women writers, then conjugates the verb 'to write' in third person masculine "yaktub".

<sup>9</sup> See al-Sammān (2006), p. 102.

a culture”<sup>10</sup> regardless of the gender of the writer. For al-Sammān, the criterion of good literature is the creativity of the literary work regardless of its subject matter. This artistic creativity marks the humanity of a work. In this sense, she labels her writings as “literature which examines the human anxiety” of both men and women.

Al-Sammān acknowledges the specificity of Arab women’s problems of suppression, subordination, and gender discrimination. She relates this specificity to the social and national changes which have taken place in different parts of the Arab world since the 1950s. Yet she declares that she explores women’s issues within its general social and national framework in the absolute belief that social improvement is impossible without liberating the woman.<sup>11</sup> She believes that women’s freedom is part and parcel of a broader freedom which is social and national. She expresses her disappointment, humiliation, and sadness after the Arab defeat in 1967: “I realised that women’s freedom means nothing in a defeated society. We cannot obtain women’s freedom unless within the framework of a homeland of free, strong, and triumphant people.”<sup>12</sup> For her, Arab feminism is done with the phase of describing the misery of Arab women. She believes that now it is time to negotiate how to emerge from this situation and most importantly how to make the lives of Arab women more human.<sup>13</sup>

Such feminist and nationalist attitudes are obvious in al-Sammān’s very early writings where she defends women’s rights within Islam. In November 1961, she wrote

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<sup>10</sup> Cooke (1988), p. 85.

<sup>11</sup> See al-Sammān (1988), pp. 141-2.

<sup>12</sup> Al-Sammān (2006), p. 55.

<sup>13</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 99.

an article entitled ‘Our Constitution – We the Liberated Women’<sup>14</sup> in reply to Muslim women in Ḥama, Syria, who protested, refusing suffrage. The same article was written in response to Shaikh Alī Ṭanṭāwā who disapproved of al-Sammān’s feminist calls and accused her of being “representative of a woman whom our society rejects.”<sup>15</sup> She starts her remarkable article with these lines:

The liberated woman is a person who believes that she is as human as a man. At the same time she acknowledges that she is female and he is male and that the difference between them is how, not how much. Since they are equally human they must have equal human rights. . . . The liberated woman today is a reality and part of the intellectual awakening of Arab society. She wants to free herself from some of the inherited social laws and traditional attitudes which contain no human meaning and which disfigure her humanity. . . . The liberated woman believes that as a human being she has the right to be responsible for herself and her society.<sup>16</sup>

With these lines, al-Sammān announces herself as an Arab feminist when feminism, in the Levant, was still struggling to be acknowledged as a movement.

This belief in the necessity of female emancipation expands to include the liberation of men who, al-Samman believes, are also suppressed in Arab societies. It continues to occupy considerable spaces of al-Sammān’s writings. *Imra’ah ‘Arabiyyah .. wa Hurrah* (*Arab Woman .. and Free*; 2006) is her latest collection of feminist articles and interviews which date from the 1960s until 2005. In this collection, al-Sammān addresses issues related to Arab women’s freedom and responsibility towards themselves and their societies. She calls for liberating both women and men from their

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<sup>14</sup> This article is translated into English. See Badran and Cooke (1990), pp. 139-143. This article has been recently published in Arabic, however, it is been published as two separate articles. See *ibid.*, pp. 11-15.

<sup>15</sup> Badran and Cooke (1990), p. 135.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140-1.



suppressive and regressive communities and encourages them to understand each other and unite in their efforts to defeat the backwardness of their Arab society.<sup>17</sup> In this sense, al-Sammān's feminism can be seen as reflective of Offen's concept of feminism as an ideology and movement where the focus lies in 'rebalancing between men and women' as argued above in Chapter Two.

Moreover, al-Sammān's feminism intersects with Offen's feminism in terms of her opposition to radical feminism. In some of her articles she sets the experience of radical Western feminists, especially Americans, as an example for Arab feminists to avoid; she warns Arab feminists not to make the same mistakes as their Western counterparts. In this regard, al-Sammān highlights the importance of family to the general social structure and encourages Arab women to create a balance between their career and their families. Thus those who advocate female liberation should take into consideration the roles of women as mother and wife. She sets some early American feminists as an example; they called for absolute equality with men without considering the different biological demands of women and men.<sup>18</sup> In some cases, this resulted in women's deprivation of their maternity rights, among other social rights. In a way, this argument echoes the previous discussion of the irrelevance of hybridity to al-Sammān's writings; rather her works can be seen as transcultural in the sense that she is selective in choosing Western beliefs and principles that she perceives to be applicable to Arabic culture and can subsequently be reflected in her literature.

As a feminist, al-Sammān takes a position against blaming men for women's oppression, which has been the case in certain historical periods. She acknowledges and

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<sup>17</sup> See al-Sammān (2006), pp. 32-3.

<sup>18</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 35-7, 46-8, 54, 63-4, 69-70.

lists some of the literary insults written by men against women. She, however, urges Arab feminists to step away from responding to men in the same insulting and provocative way. She believes that “women and men are partners in human suffering throughout ages of injustice and suppression... Their salvation lies in joining their efforts together against any spoliation of their human rights, not in quarrel with each other.”<sup>19</sup> In this sense, al-Sammān warns women of responding to hatred by hatred and to insult by insult. She puts emphasis on love and understanding between the two sexes as the main practices with which to build a healthy society. Thus, for al-Sammān, freedom is the responsibility of both men and women; in this sense, men and women can be equal in a society.

Al-Sammān addresses these issues in myriad articles published in different volumes of her *Incomplete Works* such as *Ṣafārat Indhār Dākhil Ra’sī* (*Warning Siren Inside my Head*; 1980) and *Kitābāt Ghaīr Multazimah* (*Controversial Writings*; 1980) and other works such as *Ghurbah taḥt al-Ṣifr* (*Nostalgia Under Zero*; 1986) and *al-A’māq al-Muḥtallah* (*Occupied Depths*; 1987).<sup>20</sup> Freedom, love, alienation, and responsibility are central topics of al-Sammān’s feminist writings. These thematic concerns are considered as cornerstones of literary existentialism.<sup>21</sup> Thus I will attempt to examine these existentialist themes in al-Sammān’s writings in order to highlight her innovative literary existentialist style of addressing such feminist concerns.

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<sup>19</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 40.

<sup>20</sup> For the titles of various articles published in these collections see the introduction to *ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>21</sup> See chapter four, the section on ‘Literary Existentialism: General Overview’, where reference is made to these themes as important to existentialism in its philosophical and literary forms.

- **EXISTENTIALIST ARAB FEMINISM IN AL-SAMMĀN'S QUARTET**

In this section I illustrate the feminist issues which are prevalent in al-Sammān's quartet in the light of literary existentialism. I highlight al-Sammān's exceptional method of approaching themes such as sexual oppression and Arab women's freedom while exemplifying aspects of literary existentialism. Therefore, my argument here calls attention to al-Sammān's avant-garde introduction of literary existentialism to the body of contemporary women's writings in the Mashriq.

Yasmīnah, in *Beirut '75*, though considered by some critics as the protagonist, is just another character among the main five characters. Through her only female character, al-Sammān demonstrates Levantine women's sexual repression and the concept of honour in the Middle East.<sup>22</sup> It was the discovery of her own body<sup>23</sup> which awakened in Yasmīnah the realisation of the loss and deprivation her poor and restricting society caused her through 27 years of suppression by old social norms. This relatively late realisation and lack of experience caused her pain, through her relationship with Nimr, and even contributed to her death later on. Through this character, al-Sammān portrays how sexual suppression and subordination affect Levantine women's participation in society. Yasmīnah's motivation behind her trip to Beirut is to become a poet or a writer. On the contrary, she finds herself a prisoner to Nimr's love and wealth. Her new discovery of and indulgence in sexual pleasure makes her an addict to Nimr's body and unable to fulfil her dreams and be productive in her society.

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<sup>22</sup> In this chapter, I am concerned with the literary representations of Levantine women, mainly Lebanese. However, the terms 'Middle Eastern women' and 'Middle East' will be used occasionally to refer to the general and larger background of the analysis.

<sup>23</sup> Al-Sammān (1995), p. 12.

Here, Arab women's subordination to men emerges as a feminist theme. In this case, Yasmīnah is subordinated to Nimr and her brother who is blackmailing her to turn a blind eye to her illegal relationship with Nimr. This same brother kills Yasmīnah when she decides to set free from Nimr's grip and to start a new honest life by herself. Her decision meant that she will not be able to give her brother any more money. His crime was justified by the society as a crime of honour. In this sense, Yasmīnah was killed twice: first psychologically by her backward society, then physically in her murder by her brother.

Yasmīnah's story is meant to represent one of the social ills of Lebanese society which led to the civil war. If read carefully, however, her character can be seen as an existentialist character. To start with, her sexual relationship with Nimr, while initially motivated purely by desire, eventually develops into love.<sup>24</sup> This kind of development is observed by Evans in de Beauvoir's existentialist novels where "sexual relations are always seen as emotionally significant"<sup>25</sup> to female characters. Then Yasmīnah goes through the 'limit situation' phase when she realises that Nimr does not respect her and is not going to marry her, because she had a sexual relationship with him out of wedlock. This realisation shocks her greatly and threatens the stability she seeks in Nimr's love. Her relationship with Nimr makes her aware of the extent to which she is subordinated sexually and intellectually. It is just then that she "gains insight into the break between existence and values: [her] specific problem becomes clear to [her], but there are no suitable solutions for [her] unique situation. Frequently, this thinking about [her] personal status leads to reflections on the '*condition humaine*' and doubts about

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp. 39-40.

<sup>25</sup> Evans (1985), p. 81.

the traditional views of life in general.”<sup>26</sup> Yasmīnah realises her ‘specific problem’ after she leaves Nimr. Now she is aware that her society is to be blamed for her vulnerability and the misery of other women like herself. Yet there is no solution for her situation but to try and start from the beginning—which itself leads to her tragic end.

The same case can be applied to the anonymous protagonist of *Nightmares*. The ‘limit situation’ she has to go through results in her reflections on the ‘*condition humaine*’. However, her reflections are deeper and wider than Yasmīnah’s. Al-Sammān’s protagonist is an educated bourgeois woman, like most of her female characters. Unlike Yasmīnah, she expresses a higher awareness of the physical and social distinctions between her and the other, male, characters. Besides contemplating on her ‘specific problem’ of being trapped in the house until the ceasefire, the protagonist laments the assassination of her lover at one of the checkpoints. Her contemplation expands to lament the loss of homeland and to reflect extensively on the causes of the civil strife. Thus the firefight makes al-Samman’s protagonist aware of her humanity rather her femininity in her trials to escape from the battle. This may be due to the fact that the novel is written during the intense battles of the Lebanese civil war. The intensity of the situation makes the reflections take a further dimension away from the personal dilemma of the protagonist to a wider existentialist contemplation regarding the ‘*condition humaine*’.

Moreover, in *Nightmares* al-Sammān tackles the theme of death extensively. In her ‘limit situation’ of siege, the protagonist becomes aware of one certainty: death. This fact “puts great pressure on [her] existence. Death can overtake us at any moment .

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<sup>26</sup> Stralen (2005) p. 76.

. . and we should live in the spirit of this inevitable truth.”<sup>27</sup> However, the protagonist’s awareness of this fact makes her determined to escape it. Al-Sammān, through her protagonist, demonstrates what Shukrī terms as the ‘resistance of death’ as a way of emphasising the existence of the human.<sup>28</sup> *Nightmares*’ excessive demonstration of this insight through the feminist protagonist highlights the existentialist aspect of its feminism.

In *The First Billion* there are two feminist characters: Dunya and Layla. Al-Sammān portrays these two characters as defeated feminists. She admits that, in this novel, she depicts “women who have everything but lose themselves”.<sup>29</sup> She wants to uncover the concept of ‘having everything’ which becomes very prevalent among this class and generation of young Arabs, especially women.

In her youth, Dunya was a poor hardworking art student, who struggled financially to keep up with her studies. She was a challenging revolutionary artist and feminist who held an exhibition with images of naked men. She wanted to challenge the tradition of men drawing naked women by doing the opposite. At the time, her exhibition was considered a scandal which emphasised its controversy. Yet Dunya was converted from being a challenging artist to becoming an obedient wife whose life revolves around her husband’s successful business.<sup>30</sup> Dunya’s dissatisfaction with her current (degrading) situation could be seen as a mid-life crisis. Her pain, however, is deep; she has lost self respect and motivation. She loved Nadīm when she married him. Yet this marriage transfers her from a feminist activist to bourgeois woman whose life

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>28</sup> See Shukrī (1990), p. 173.

<sup>29</sup> Al-Sammān (2006), p. 44.

<sup>30</sup> Al-Sammān (2005), pp. 141-4.

revolves around her husband's benefits. Her recent awareness of the drastic change of her life culminates in her existentialist thoughts of what is the purpose of her life and what she wants to do if she were really free from the clutches of the materialist community surrounding her.

As previously mentioned, in existentialist literary works 'the other' is at the centre of each character's development. Here, Raghīd, the other, plays an essential role in Dunya's dilemma. While she tries to retrieve her old real person, Raghīd comments saying: "Dunya's gone back to championing women's causes. We thought we were through with all that when we bought off the husbands of the other women in her circle and the magazine that used to publish all sorts of nonsense for them."<sup>31</sup> Dunya creates her 'limit situation' by her surrender to the materialist capitalist Nadīm. She tries to save herself from this degradation by attempting to paint again but realises that she is incapable of painting anymore. She has a surreal confrontation with an old painting of hers. The girl in the painting represents Dunya's conscience and tries to awaken the revolutionary side in Dunya's character through a series of conversations that seem to Dunya as dreams in surreal environments. Defeated as she is, she concludes that "nothing can erase our sins after all. And it's impossible to break through the time barrier, since the bridges we burn behind us can't be rebuilt."<sup>32</sup> This existentialist contemplation sums up the defeat of Dunya, the feminist.

Layla Sabbāk's defeat by materialism is slightly different. She is a single lawyer in her early forties. Like Dunya, she used to be a revolutionary. She endures a "subjective, existential, floating alienation [where she denies] that the true roots of her

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 360.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 543.

alienation lay in her loss of a homeland.”<sup>33</sup> Her denial of the truthfulness of her nationalist and feminist affiliation leads her to surrender to Raghīd in an attempt to join men in their materialist power game. She is driven by her strong realisation that

The proletariat may have found someone to defend them, but all women have found are those who are ready to use women’s suffering to defend the male proletariat. So if the revolution should succeed, the men will reap its fruits while the women are sent back into hiding. Even the “revolutionization of women” is a pretense. Everything’s a pretense. And the simple solution is for me to work like a man and to love like a man. . . . I’m tired. Tired. I’m always giving. I was taught that my calling as a woman is to give. But then something went slightly amiss. I noticed that nobody really loved me as a female.<sup>34</sup>

This existentialist feminist contemplation reveals both Layla’s gender and national alienation. She goes through her ‘limit situation’ when she realises that she is not loved as a ‘female’, but only because she is fulfilling the prescribed female role of ‘giver’, and when she realises that women are the only losers in political struggle. Then she becomes aware of her ‘specific problem’ and reflects on the ‘*condition humaine*’ and her earlier views on revolution and liberty. Her choice of a solution to her problem—living and working like a man—results with her tragic end; she commits suicide.

These two defeated feminist characters reveal the danger of materialism and capitalism on Arab feminism. In a way, al-Sammān points out the concurrency between class struggle and feminist struggle. She also highlights the inner conflicts and psychological alienation of revolutionary Arab feminists in exile. In al-Sammān’s works, this kind of situation leads to tragic end. This is done by implementing

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 179.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 383.



existentialist narrative techniques while depicting the characters' 'limit situation' and their reaction to their '*condition humaine*'.

The same materialistic background is valid in *Masquerade*. Yet Samīrah, the feminist character, reveals a more positive perspective than these two defeated feminists. The young promising writer is considered by some Lebanese men as a 'fallen woman' for her controversial views and challenging attitude.<sup>35</sup> Throughout the novel she expresses a high level of commitment with feminist and patriotic principles which shape her '*condition humaine*'. Towards the onset of a new century the young Lebanese woman is liberated from the sexual oppression Yasmīnah had to endure thirty years ago. Samīrah meets Fawwāz one early morning at the beach without previous appointment in what seems an absurdist atmosphere, where they make love passionately.<sup>36</sup> Despite the fact that this sexual relationship is portrayed as an articulation of their mutual love for each other, it can be still seen 'emotionally significant' to Samīrah; the existentialist feminist character. However, its significance to Samīrah is completely different from that of Yasmīnah. On the one hand, Yasmīnah's sexual relationship with Nimr makes her subordinate to her lover. On the other hand, for Samīrah this sexual experience is liberating; she addresses Fawwāz saying: "Now that we made love, we freed ourselves from the danger of confusing love with physical sexual attraction. This will enable me to know whether I truly love you or if I am only sexually attracted to you. The same goes for you."<sup>37</sup> Therefore, for Samīrah the 'emotional significance' of this sexual relationship transcends the traditional meaning as expressed in subordination (the case

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<sup>35</sup> Al-Sammān (2003), p. 102.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., pp. 281-3.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 283.

of Yasmīnah) or in counter-challenge that leads to a defeat (the case of Dunya and Layla); rather, it culminates in love.

Al-Sammān establishes this sexual liberation as the background for further liberations: political, economical, and social. Samīrah's love for her homeland is deeper and stronger than her love to Fawwāz. She refuses to marry him because she wants to stay in Lebanon. She is represented as a committed feminist and nationalist. With this character, al-Sammān gives hope to young Arab women by illustrating that love and independence could bestow happiness on Arab feminists.<sup>38</sup> She also expresses a considerable improvement in the way she depicts her feminist characters. In this quartet, al-Sammān's feminist characters develop from Yasmīnah who represents ignorance, surrender, and subordination; to the protagonist of *Nightmares* who represents a troubled awareness; then Dunya and Layla who represent challenge and defeat; and finally Samīrah who strongly stands for an active, assertive, feminist consciousness.

This improvement can be seen as an attempt by al-Sammān to move away from the repetitive style mentioned above where, like de Beauvoir, her heroines are re-created over and over again in different novels and short stories under different names. This characteristic of al-Sammān's quartet—that is, creating different types of female protagonists who represent different stages in the feminist struggle in Lebanon in particular and the Levant on a larger scale—this characteristic is one of the major aspects that distinguishes al-Sammān's feminist existentialism from the Western one, in particular de Beauvoir's. In this sense, the term *existentialist Arab feminism* may best

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<sup>38</sup> For more information on the relevance of love to existentialist feminism see Ghassān al-Sayyid, *Al-Ḥurrīyyah al-Wujūdīyah bayna al-Fikr wa-al-Wāqi': Dirāsah fī al-Adab al-Muqāran (Existentialist Freedom between Rationalism and Realism: A Study in Comparative Literature)*, (Dimashq: Dār al-Rihāb, 2001; 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1994), pp. 189-194.

describe al-Sammān's feminist existentialism by highlighting her avant-garde introduction of this literary style to the writings of contemporary Arab women. Despite the impact of Western philosophy and literature on her writings, al-Sammān seems to depart away from her early repetitive mode of writing by inventing a new literary existentialist style through which she articulates feminist beliefs and principles. In brief, al-Sammān's *existentialist Arab feminism* can be seen as an adoption of the belief that "existentialism announces freedom as the essence of man's existence. By 'man' we mean men and women who together complete the cycle of life and its development. Therefore, [in an existentialist text] women's role in society cannot be ignored".<sup>39</sup>

Thus, al-Sammān is a distinguished Arab feminist in the way she tackles Arab women's problems as part of the more general national and social problems. She engages with themes such as love, alienation, and death while calling for comprehensive freedom. She expresses feminist concerns by implementing existentialist techniques while simultaneously creating a progressive rhythm which marks her style with innovation. In this sense, she is considered an avant-garde in the way she avoids the limitations of the above-mentioned *vicious cycle mode*; rather she breaks through the literary and thematic boundaries of previous Arab women writers and contributes to Arabic literature through her existentialist Arab feminist writings.

### **EXISTENTIALIST NATIONALISM**

Feminist and nationalist issues are inseparably linked in al-Sammān's writing. Following on from the previous examination of al-Sammān's *existentialist Arab*

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 151. Translation of all references from this book is mine.

*feminism*, in the next section I explore the innovative stylistic means by which she articulates nationalist causes through literary existentialism. I propose a new understanding of the usefulness of existentialism for conveying nationalism and suggest the term *existentialist nationalism* to identify al-Sammān's major breakthrough in establishing such understanding in modern Arabic literature. For this purpose, it is necessary to start with a brief review of al-Sammān's nationalist concerns before illustrating her mode of nationalism against the backdrop of her literary existentialism. This will be illuminated by various examples from the quartet under study.

- **AL-SAMMĀN'S NATIONALISM**

Al-Sammān's nationalist affiliation is prominent in her works. She was born in a critical time of Syria's national movement against the French mandate. As a child of five years of age she observed Syria's independence and chanted along the new national anthem.<sup>40</sup> As a teenager she witnessed the loss of family members in Arab wars such as the 1948 *nakbah* and the 1967 *naksah*. Being brought up in Syria in the 1940s and 1950s, played an important role in her national affiliation to Syria in particular and the Arab world in general.

When al-Sammān began writing early in the 1960s, she let out a cry for freedom and liberation from all kinds of tyranny, regression, and subordination. This cry for freedom is accompanied by an early realisation that there is no such thing as 'individual freedom'; free men and women can only co-exist and practise their freedom in a free society. From here al-Sammān examined women's liberation, for instance, in the backdrop of general social and political liberation of Arab societies, as has been

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<sup>40</sup> See al-Sammān (1999), p.44.

discussed above. The unstable political situation in the Arab world generally, and in the Levant in particular, provides al-Sammān with such a framework for her writings. The Arab defeat of 1967 is a prevalent theme of her renowned collection of short stories *Departure of the Ancient Ports* (1973) among other works. A few years later, the Lebanese civil war broke out in 1975. This event transferred al-Sammān's nationalism from pan-Arab nationalism to Lebanese nationalism. This transformation can be observed as well in her literary style.

Similar to the improvement of al-Sammān's style in portraying her feminist characters as mentioned above, she expresses a similar attitude in reflecting upon national affiliation. Most of the protagonists of *Departure* are driven by their political and/or national frustration in leaving their homelands. However, in her post-1975 writings al-Sammān expresses different kinds of national awareness. For instance, the national aspect of *Nightmares* is best exemplified through the revolutionary anonymous protagonist and her reflection of the war. This protagonist is aware of her national identity; she epitomises her national affiliation at the beginning of the novel: "Life had taught me that it was no use running away from where I truly belonged. I was a daughter of this land, a daughter of this Arab region so ridden with unrest and turmoil that it threatened to boil over at any moment. I was also a daughter of this war. This was my destiny."<sup>41</sup> Hence, it can be argued that in her quartet al-Sammān goes beyond her previous style of portraying fugitive revolutionary nationalists; rather she depicts nationalists who are aware of their affiliation and willing to take the ensuing challenge

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<sup>41</sup> Al-Sammān (1997), p. 47.

and frustration. The same attitude is applicable to Samīrah of *Masquerade* and Khalīl of *The First Billion*—the latter will be discussed in the next section.

Zeidan considers the articulation of the national affiliation of al-Sammān's protagonist in *Nightmares* to be

in stark contrast with . . . the *vicious circle* [situation], in which female characters feel trapped in their home towns and gender roles, and where those who leave the traditional life style for Arab women are scorned or pressured to return to a life of passivity, dependence, and servitude. Growing concern for national unity and identity transformed the image of returning home in fictional works by Arab women.<sup>42</sup>

Therefore, the improvement of al-Sammān's literary nationalism can be seen as exceptional in comparison to that of her predecessors of Arab women writers. Consequently, it underlines the avant-garde aspect of her writings, especially the quartet under study.

Al-Sammān's quartet is set around the national crisis of the Lebanese civil war. She depicts the effects of the civil strife on Lebanese society before, during, and after the war. She portrays the political situation in Lebanon through the frustration, disappointment, and sadness of Lebanese patriots through her different characters. She achieves this by implementing literary existentialist features as will be discussed in the following section.

- **EXISTENTIALIST NATIONALISM IN AL-SAMMĀN'S QUARTET**

As has been noted, times of war and national crisis form a typical setting for existentialist writings, or what Stralen calls 'the limit situation'. Therefore, the 'limit situation' in al-Sammān's quartet is the Lebanese civil war with its "threatening

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<sup>42</sup> Zeidan (1995), pp. 198-9.

processes, which came into being by means of supra-individual factors”.<sup>43</sup> Such limit situations stimulate feelings of fear and anxiety. They also bring up critical existentialist themes such as life and death, despair, finitude, and alienation. The exploration of such themes by using literary existentialism underlines the creativity and avant-gardism of al-Sammān’s quartet. The following examples from this quartet will illuminate these existentialist nationalist features. This analysis is again mostly based on Stralen’s abovementioned three semantic topoi of the ‘limit situation’, the ‘other’, and ‘engagement’.

The Lebanese civil war is the axis around which the events revolve in al-Sammān’s quartet. While *Beirut ’75* predicts the break-out of the civil strife in Lebanon, *Nightmares* is a lively portrait of the atrocity of the civil war during its first year. *The First Billion* tackles the exiled Lebanese’ predicament during the Israeli invasion of Beirut in 1982. Finally *Masquerade* is set in Beirut in the aftermath of the civil war. These four novels depict the civil strife in Lebanon in four phases. Throughout these phases, the ‘limit situation’ is the catalyst of the characters’ existentialist thoughts, feelings, and actions.

The second existentialist literary convention, that of ‘the other,’ is also explored effectively in this quartet. This ‘other’ in three of the novels of the quartet is exemplified by a bourgeois character. Yet the existentialist character is different in the four novels. In *Beirut ’75*, the nationalist trends are not very clear since the war has not started yet. There are, however, sparks of a national movement. Muṣṭafā, the poor fisherman, is provoked by the exploitation of Nimr, the bourgeois other, and his class.

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<sup>43</sup> Stralen (2005), p. 81.

As a poor young man, he had to leave his studies and desert his poetry to work and feed his starving family. The pressures practiced by the bourgeoisie on poor young men like him, drive them to action. The novel sets class discrimination as one of the main causes of the civil war. However, it ends with no indication of the situation of Muṣṭafā and his comrades. This is until Muṣṭafā resurfaces as a character in *Masquerade*, the last novel in the quartet.

Muṣṭafā's ghostly appearance is a reminder of the revolutionary nationalist seeds planted earlier in the quartet. In *Masquerade*, Muṣṭafā is referred to with a different name, Munīr, the name of the real person upon which the writer based her character. Mārīyā, the author/narrator, describes how he develops from a revolutionary before the war to a militia leader during the war. In the post-militia phase in Lebanon, Munīr/Muṣṭafā becomes a wealthy business man. The journalists refer to his palace mockingly as "proletarian palace".<sup>44</sup> The development of this character displays the process through which most Lebanese nationalists go. Through Mārīyā's intention to kill this character in her new novel, al-Sammān expresses her rejection of these kinds of "nationalists" who ended up as war profiteers and her larger "rejection of corruption and suppressing all kinds of freedom".<sup>45</sup> In this sense, al-Sammān pinpoints a major problem in Lebanese nationalism. This issue seems to be an inevitable consequence of the war.

However, Munīr/Muṣṭafā is portrayed in a surreal way; throughout *Masquerade* he appears as a ghost. He realises that Mārīyā wants to kill him symbolically, not once but many times through the tragic deaths of the characters of Nājī and 'Abdul Karīm,

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<sup>44</sup> Al-Sammān (2003), p. 243, 260-65.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 262.



the fraudsters. He decides to kill her before she metaphorically kills him in her new novel. There are scenes with him entering Mārīyā's flat without breaking into it, kidnapping Mārīyā and imprisoning her in the basement of his palace. She could set herself free of this imprisonment simply by writing her escape in her head. She wakes up to find herself on her desk working on her novel. Later she visits the location of his palace only to realise that the palace has disappeared.<sup>46</sup> This metaphoric use of writing as means of liberation is demonstrated in this surreal and ghostly atmosphere. Munīr/Muṣṭafā's surreal appearance marks this originally nationalist character with aesthetic existentialist features.

Hence, the nationalist feature of Munīr/Muṣṭafā's character is set in the past. The same thing applies to Khalīl in the way he shows up in *Masquerade*. Khalīl, now old, disabled and defeated, recalls the story of his struggle and return to Beirut from Geneva. In his conversation with Fawwāz, Khalīl narrates the history of the modern Middle East in a patriotic mode. He starts with the 1948 *nakbah* and establishment of the state of Israel which within few decades develops the turbulent situation in Lebanon. In the case of both Munīr/Muṣṭafā and Khalīl the concentration is on the present dilemma of the aftermath of the civil strife in Lebanon. However, al-Sammān's 'tendency to regress' to the original inevitable 'limit situation' is clear in the way she demonstrates the irrevocable link between the past and the present. Her reluctance to negotiate the future emphasises these protagonists as 'aesthetic literary existentialists'.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 276-7, 312-317, 319.

<sup>47</sup> This argument is based on the above mentioned differentiation made by Stralen between aesthetic and ethical literary existentialism. See Stralen (2005), p. 74.

In *Nightmares*, the case of the character-other is slightly different. The positive female protagonist plays the role of the other. She is in power and keeps events within the 'limit situation' under control while she tries restlessly to leave the confinement of the 'limit space'. She exercises her power over Amīn who is playing "the role of the traditional Eastern 'female' in his father's household."<sup>48</sup> While she is assertive and determined to leave the house, Amīn envies her for being able to make the decision. It is interesting that al-Sammān demonstrates her nationalist affiliations through her assertive female characters while ascribing passivity to male characters.

Apart from this other-character division, the protagonist's national affiliation is best demonstrated in the distinction between the pen and the weapon. She portrays the futility of theoretical doctrines in the context of the real fight. She ponders about the role of the written word in war. Through her contemplation, the author asks the question of "the need for a new language that will combine the power of the pen and the gun."<sup>49</sup> In *Nightmares*, dialogue is replaced with inner monologues. At the beginning of their siege, the protagonist and her brother "didn't exchange any conversation. It was as if the sound of bullets flying through the air had rendered language ineffectual, or had created some sort of insulating wall, increasing each person's awareness of his individuality and isolation, an isolation in which each of us had fallen into his own personal well ...".<sup>50</sup> This isolation continues to dominate the atmosphere of the novel. In a way, this intensifies the absurdity of the whole setting and underlines the existentialist nature of these inner monologues.

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<sup>48</sup> Al-Sammān (1997), p. 121.

<sup>49</sup> Cooke (1988), p. 44.

<sup>50</sup> Al-Sammān (1997), p. 9.

The theme of the pen versus the gun is resumed in *The First Billion*. Khalīl exemplifies the intellectual who never carried a weapon and will never do, as a rejection of violence. This honest man who is not willing to compromise when it comes to patriotism represents the role of intellectual nationalists during the civil strife in Lebanon. However, the intelligentsia could not prevent the war, or help in defusing it as this was a war fought through a combination of weapons and ignorance. Khalīl contemplates the reason behind his exile. It is not the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, it is the threat of his Lebanese compatriots. He muses:

Driving him and thousands of others like him out of Lebanon – wasn't it part of a plan to empty the country of those who would defend it, scattering them abroad and distracting them with petty disputes in preparation for bringing the country down and making it that much easier to swallow up? Past offenses might be forgiven. But would it be possible after this for an Arab to take up arms against another Arab? Certainly not. It was unthinkable.<sup>51</sup>

Khalīl illustrates the further dimensions of the Lebanese civil war and sheds light on Arabs' responsibility towards the events. Thus he turns from Lebanese to pan-Arab nationalism. Khalīl's inner monologues and the emphasis of responsibility in his nationalist convictions, highlight this character as a good exemplar of this nationalist existentialist axis.

Khalīl and Amīr are the most patriotic characters in *The First Billion* and probably in the whole quartet. While both of them are under the control of the other, Raghīd, Khalīl remains the existentialist nationalist character. Being more exposed to the 'limit situation', Khalīl's temporary self-imposed exile is a series of inner conflicts

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<sup>51</sup> Al-Sammān (2005), p. 149.

and monologues, while Amīr, in his forced exile, is more assertive. He is almost always in dialogue with other characters. These existentialist features do not apply as much to Amīr's active character. Furthermore, Khalīl flees Beirut under the increasing pressure of the 'limit situation' which is considered by Stralen an existentialist characteristic since "in existentialism we are taught that one should make decisions under the pressure of circumstances."<sup>52</sup> However, Khalīl's return to Beirut from Geneva is a conscious decision urged by love of his homeland and loyalty to his nationalist affiliation.

Moreover, the existentialist character of Khalīl is always portrayed as being under the control of the other. Stralen emphasises that in

existentialist texts – certainly within the limit situation – the other is not an abstract fellow man, but a factor, which cannot be ignored, with which the individual is in a tense situation. His presence requires taking stances and making choices and the characters in literary existentialism soon learn it is impossible to remain living innocently and purely with the other. [The other] can pressurize the life atmosphere of the individual.<sup>53</sup>

Within Khalīl's limit situation, Kafā plays another 'other'. From the beginning she gives him no choice but to leave Beirut. In Geneva she takes responsibility and makes all the decisions regarding their life and his work. The intensity practised by Kafā on Khalīl forces him to the final and crucial decision of going back to Beirut. Thus, the inner monologues, the influence of the 'other' and the 'limit situation' highlight Khalīl as the existentialist nationalist character in *The First Billion*.

This section highlights the existentialist features of al-Sammān's nationalist work as exemplified here by her quartet. This has been illustrated by drawing upon

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<sup>52</sup> Stralen (2005), p. 83.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

various examples from al-Sammān's quartet in which she explores nationalist themes against the backdrop of the Lebanese civil war. Thus, she is concerned mainly with Lebanese nationalism with occasional shifts to pan-Arab nationalism. Al-Sammān displays existentialist themes of death and responsibility in the backdrop of surreal environments which accentuates the existentialist character of her quartet. The nationalist and existentialist features of al-Sammān's quartet are best illustrated in the way she keeps returning to the most two nationalist characters, Munīr/Muṣṭafā and Khalīl, and by portraying them through existentialist conventions such as references to the past, monologues within the limit situation, and conflicts with the other—in addition to other aesthetic strategies. Al-Sammān embeds these characteristics so as to pinpoint the importance of the national struggle in Lebanon, which is what makes her work most original. This avant-garde *existentialist nationalist* literary style leads us to a new understanding of existentialism that goes beyond the traditional concept of literary existentialism to embrace a new framework which incorporates nationalist struggles.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this chapter I look at existentialist Arab feminist and nationalist themes in al-Sammān's quartet. Following on from the argument of the previous chapter, where al-Sammān's quartet is discussed as a fundamentally existentialist literary production, in this chapter I have deliberately examined al-Sammān's portrayal of Arab feminist and nationalist concerns using literary existentialist features and characteristics. By doing so, my reading underlines the ways in which al-Sammān's cry for freedom is achieved

through her deployment of new literary modes. In the first section of this chapter I highlight al-Sammān's engagement with Arab feminism. Stralen's understanding of literary existentialism was then discussed, in particular its applicability to her feminist characters. I follow the same methodology in the second part of the chapter, which illustrates al-Sammān's nationalist commitments before examining the deployment of literary existentialist topoi in the description of her nationalist characters.

This examination of al-Sammān's quartet in the light of literary existentialism underlines her innovation in establishing a new method of understanding existentialism in relation to the modern Arabic novel. Al-Sammān skilfully represents Arab feminist concerns by applying existentialist characteristics and conventions to her writing. However, she goes beyond the repetitive style already established by Western writers such as de Beauvoir to establish a style of her own, which I have termed as *existentialist Arab feminism*. Similarly, al-Sammān employs literary existentialism in order to reflect nationalist themes in Lebanon. Therefore, she introduces a new way of conceptualising and imagining the relevance of existentialism to nationalism and, in so doing, initiates a new literary trend which I have termed as *existentialist nationalism*. These literary breakthroughs underline al-Sammān as an *avant-garde* writer whose literary production contributes to Arabic literature in general, and to the writings of contemporary women in the Mashriq in particular, with material which engages with themes and techniques that go far beyond the traditional subject matters and literary styles used by women of previous generations. By doing so, she launches a literary style that transcends the established familiarity of the *vicious cycle mode*.



## PART THREE

### NARRATING PAIN AND RESISTANCE

Part three of this thesis consists of three chapters which examine the works of Sahar Khalīfah in the light of her use of critical realism as a literary approach. I further present Khalīfah as an *avant-garde* contemporary Arab woman writer through her innovative literary aesthetics. On the one hand, she, like al-Sammān, introduces new narrative styles by creating a series of novels which can stand separately while still forming a sequel. On the other hand, she engages with the practices of literary critical realism in order to reflect feminist and nationalist causes in Palestine. Accordingly, this part identifies Khalīfah's innovative literary styles as *realistic nationalism* and *realistic feminism*. Therefore, I present Khalīfah as an author capable of transcending the *vicious cycle mode* predominant among other Arab women writers, both contemporary and from preceding generations.





## CHAPTER SIX

### KHALĪFAH'S TRILOGY: FROM AL-ŞABBĀR TO BĀB AL-SĀḤAH

In this opening chapter I present close readings of Khalīfah's three novels: *Al-Şabbār* (*Wild Thorns*; 1976), '*Abbād al-Shams: Takmilat Al-Şabbār* (*Sunflower: the Sequel to Wild Thorns*; 1980), and *Bāb al-Sāḥah* (*The Gate of the Square*; 1990).<sup>1</sup> These novels are set in the Palestinian occupied territories, especially the West Bank town of Nāblus, in the historical period beginning in the aftermath of the June War of 1967 until the first Intifada (Palestinian uprising) in December 1987. These three novels may be considered as 'resistance literature'; a term which was first applied by Ghassān Kanafānī to describe literature written in Palestine in opposition to the Israeli occupation.<sup>2</sup> I will further explore this consideration before offering a detailed analysis of the novels.

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<sup>1</sup> The three novels' publication dates mentioned here are the dates of the first editions of these novels. In the context of this thesis, I refer to the more recent editions mentioned in the bibliography. Only *Al-Şabbār* has been translated into English as *Wild Thorns* (1985). Hence from now on, reference will be made to the 2005 edition of this translation unless otherwise mentioned. As for the other two novels, English translation of the titles and all quotations from these novels are mine, unless otherwise mentioned. From now on I will also refer to these novels by their abbreviated English titles. Transliteration of titles and characters' names is mine.

<sup>2</sup> See Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature*, (New York: Methuen, 1987), p. 2.

## PALESTINIAN RESISTANCE LITERATURE

In her study of resistance literature, Barbara Harlow underlines the significant impact of any occupation on the literature of the occupied. She illustrates that the Israeli “occupying power [has] both exiled and subjugated [the Palestinian] population and has in addition significantly intervened in the literary and cultural development of the people it has dispossessed and whose land it has occupied.”<sup>3</sup> Harlow’s argument further highlights Kanafānī’s distinction between two kinds of literature which resulted from the Israeli occupation: “exile literature” (adab al-manfā) and “resistance literature [in occupied Palestine]” (al-’adab al-muqāwim [Fī al-’Arḍ al-Muḥtallah]).<sup>4</sup> Kanafānī’s argument is, however, based on a very important factor, that is language. He highlights the struggle of the Arabs of Israel to preserve their culture and language and how this struggle affects the literary production of Palestinian writers who live in Israel. He states: “in order to acknowledge the real value of Palestinian resistance literature in occupied Palestine . . . it is necessary to realise the range of daily hardships and challenges to Arabic culture in the occupied territories.”<sup>5</sup>

Kanafānī underlines the rigid conditions of Palestinians’ life in Israel and the occupied territories and its effect on resistance literature. He emphasises in particular

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> See Ghassān Kanafānī, *Adab al-Muqāwamah Fī Filasṭīn al-Muḥtallah: 1948-1966 (Literature of Resistance in Occupied Palestine: 1948-1966)*, (Bayrūt: Dār al-Ādāb, n.d.), pp. 10-12. Title transliteration is mine. Translations from this source are mine. It is worth mentioning that Kanafānī in this text seems to use ‘Arab al-’Arḍ al-Muḥtallah (p. 17), al-’Arab Fī Filasṭīn al-Muḥtallah (p. 18), and al-’Arab Fī Israel (p. 19) interchangeably without making specific distinctions between Palestinians in the occupied territories of Gaza and the West Bank and those inside Israel. I therefore interpret his statements as referring to both categories.

<sup>5</sup> See Ghassān Kanafānī, *Al-’Adab al-Filasṭīnī al-Muqāwim taḥta al-Iḥtilāl: 1948-1968 (Palestinian Resistance Literature Under Occupation: 1948-1968)*, (Bayrūt: Mu’asasat ad-Dirāsāt al-Filasṭīniyah, 1968), p. 18. Title transliteration is mine. Translations from this source are mine.

the fact that the majority of those who were left in occupied Palestine are simple country/rural people who, besides their ignorance of Arabic literature, live under unbearable social, political, and cultural isolation.<sup>6</sup> Kanafānī considers resistance literature to be specifically reflective of the culture and language of those Palestinians who remain inside Israel and the occupied territories. Because of their cultural and literary isolation, they have retained the practice of traditional poetry which is mostly orally transmitted.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, resistance literature in Israel and the occupied territories is deeply embedded in the language and daily struggle of those who live there under Israeli rule. These social and linguistic features are continued in the practice of contemporary writers when the novel is acknowledged as a literary genre in the mid-twentieth century. Writing from *within* the occupied territories, Saḥar Khalīfah implements these linguistic and social features remarkably which makes her one of the focal points of this dissertation. Consequently, I consider Khalīfah's novels under study as Palestinian resistance literature written within the occupied territories.

### **KHALĪFAH'S TRILOGY**

In *Wild Thorns*, the first novel to be studied here, Khalīfah depicts the direct impact of the 1967 Arab defeat by Israel on Palestinians in the occupied territories by reflecting on its repercussions for the people of Nāblus. She maintains the same subject-matter in *Sunflower* which forms the second part to the larger story begun in *Wild*

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<sup>6</sup> See Kanafānī, *Literature of Resistance*, p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 13-17. See also Aḥmad Abū Maṭar, *Al-Riwāyah fī al-'Adab al-Filasṭīnī, 1950-1975 (The Novel in Palestinian Literature 1950-1975)*, (Bayrūt: al-Mu'assasah al-'Arabīyah, 1980), pp. 256-7.

*Thorns*. However, she incorporates the cause of Palestinian women within occupied Palestine as a major theme in this second novel. Finally, *The Gate of the Square* portrays the situation in Nāblus during the first Intifada which erupted in December 1987 while highlighting the dilemma of Palestinian women during that period. *The Gate* has not previously been regarded as the third part of the previous sequence. In this third novel, however, Khalīfah can be seen to complete the picture drawn in her previous novels of the Palestinian suffering under Israeli military and economic occupation and, as I am arguing here, these novels can be said to form a trilogy.

I have chosen these three resistance novels to examine in this chapter because they narrate the story of the Palestinian resistance movement in exile and in the occupied territories and, moreover, the gradual participation of Palestinian women in this movement. They also carefully portray the social structure that encompasses the resistance and feminist movements under Israeli occupation. In this sense, Khalīfah tackles critical issues such as social taboos, the nature of injustice (whether perpetrated by Jews or Arabs), class and gender discrimination, and questions of social and political freedom. Khalīfah sets her novels against the backdrop of the struggles against the Israeli occupation and examines Palestinian women's status and freedom within the political turmoil and Palestinian nationalist struggle. In so doing, Khalīfah establishes an inseparable link between feminist causes and nationalist ones.

In this chapter I will illuminate Khalīfah's literary representation of nationalist and feminist movements in the occupied territories. I also provide a brief summary of the narrative of each novel and emphasise the case for their interlinked status as a trilogy by highlighting the continuity of certain themes and characters. In addition, I

argue that Khalīfah creates a series of sequels that can be studied independently yet at the same time form a trilogy. Hence, Khalīfah, like al-Sammān, introduces a new style of literary narrative to the writings of contemporary Arab women. This chapter provides the necessary background against which the subsequent study of critical realism in the next two chapters should be considered.

- **WILD THORNS**

In my analysis, I approach Khalīfah's novels chronologically. Thus *Al-Ṣabbār* is the first novel to be examined here. It was published for the first time in 1976 and translated into English as *Wild Thorns* in 1985. It is set in Nāblus in the context of the post-1967 Arab defeat by Israel and the latter's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The novel depicts the socio-political changes within the occupied territories during this historical period from two perspectives: the armed resistance movement exemplified by Usāmah and the stereotypical intellectual and peace-loving stance represented by 'Ādil; the former is the militant cousin of the latter.

*Wild Thorns* opens with Usāmah al-Karmī returning to Nāblus from the Arab Gulf under the auspices of the 'family reunification program'. He has been trained by the Palestinian resistance movement in exile and sent back to execute operations against the Israeli occupiers. In his journey to join his mother in Nāblus he has to cross the Allenby Bridge, which is currently the only exit point for West Bank Palestinians into Jordan. In the second chapter at the bridge checkpoint, the reader is introduced to the hardships that the Palestinians have to endure on a daily basis at checkpoints. The conflict between Palestinian and Israeli identities is simply and starkly dramatised in the

questioning of Usāmah by the Israeli guard at the checkpoint where the latter refers to Nāblus by the Hebrew name; “Shekem”.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout his journey, Usāmah is haunted by the screams of an Arab girl arrested at the checkpoint when they found a coded message under her wig. The figure of the arrested girl has two important dimensions: Palestinian women’s participation in the resistance movement as early as the period following the 1967 war and the resistance from within the occupied territories as a supplement to the organised armed resistance in exile. These are further supported by the figure of another woman, one of the passengers in the taxi with Usāmah. In her forties, with a firm voice and steady gaze, the woman wears a plaster cast on her left forearm. She calms Usāmah and the other passenger who are upset with the disregard of the passengers for the screams of the arrested girl. Several days later, Usāmah sees the woman in the old–centre of Nāblus without the plaster cast.<sup>9</sup> These two figures are introduced very briefly without background information or detailed description of their activities, yet their presence highlights Palestinian women’s activism against the occupation.

Upon his return, Usāmah is shocked by what he sees of his people’s situation under occupation. Having departed for an Arab country in the Gulf three months after the onset of the Israeli occupation, Usāmah had become disengaged from the daily realities of people within the occupied territories. He is upset to find that five years later, Palestinians in the occupied territories work in Israeli factories, deal with Israeli products, and enjoy food and fashion in a manner that seems to him disengaged with the

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<sup>8</sup> Saḥar Khalīfah, *Wild Thorns*, trans. Trevor Le Gassick and Elizabeth Fernea, (London: Saqi Books, 2005; 1st ed. 1985), p. 13.

<sup>9</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 22-25.

realities of occupation.<sup>10</sup> As a guerrilla fighter,<sup>11</sup> Usāmah expects his people to boycott Israeli products, even if these are cheaper than Palestinian ones. He also expects them to be concerned with the national struggle against the Israelis more than their occupation with everyday trivialities. He describes their complaints about the difficult economic situation as “the panting of the sick”.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, Khalīfah illustrates the disconnection between the resistance movement in exile and the daily realities of Palestinian people under occupation.

Moreover, the new economic conditions imposed by the Israeli occupation cause the collapse of previously established distinctions between social classes.<sup>13</sup> As a consequence of the occupation, workers from the lower classes have the opportunity to work in Israeli factories for better wages than those they would earn if they worked for Palestinian employers. Hence, Khalīfah reflects on one of the occupation’s realities which are perceived as a ‘blessing in disguise’ for lower-class Palestinians in the occupied territories. This is displayed by one of Zuhdī’s co-prisoners who states sarcastically: “History will find it hard to judge whether the occupation was a blessing or a disaster. It’s a tough question.”<sup>14</sup>

However, this kind of representation is considered highly provocative by some critics and politicians, such as Imīl Ḥabībī who criticised Khalīfah for emphasising the issue of the relative improvements in the status of Arab workers in Israel over the

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<sup>10</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 22-28.

<sup>11</sup> Palestinian guerrilla fighters are called *fidā’een*. In this thesis, I use this term occasionally.

<sup>12</sup> Khalīfah (2005), p. 24.

<sup>13</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p.147.



grievance relating to the Israeli military confiscation and occupation of Palestinian lands.<sup>15</sup> For Khalīfah

class antagonism in Palestinian society, which is always compounded by the highhanded behavior of the status-conscious Palestinian rich, is more acutely felt by the Palestinian poor than is national antagonism towards the Israeli occupier. Khalifah therefore insists that for many workers, working in Israel was an act of social defiance before it became economic necessity.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, this ‘social defiance’ although imposed indirectly by the occupation as means of co-existence with/under the occupation, has a major role in re-constructing familial and patriarchal politics in occupied Palestine.<sup>17</sup> This is illustrated through incidents such as the loosened authority of the traditional head of al-Karmī and the coming of age of young Bāssel as a new authority.

This kind of change in the traditional socio-economic structure offers people like Shaḥādah the golden opportunity to leave al-Karmī’s farm and work for the Israelis for better wages. As a consequence, ‘Ādil, the descendant of the landed gentry of al-Karmī, is left with no one to work on his family’s farm and so he begins to work in Israeli factories under the increasing pressure of supporting a large family and maintaining the payments for his father’s kidney dialysis machine. This kind of affliction enforced by the occupation unites ‘Ādil with poor workers such as Zuhdī and Abu Ṣābir. He says: “Misfortune’s united us and made us equal. . . . Worry makes us

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<sup>15</sup> See Muhammad Siddiq, ‘The Fiction of Sahar Khalifah: Between Defiance and Deliverance’, *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 8, Issue 2 (1986), pp. 143-160 (147).

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Siddiq, ‘The Fiction of Sahar Khalifah’, p. 148.

<sup>17</sup> See K. S. Song, ‘The Writing of Sahar Khalifah: from Margin to Centre’, *Annals of Japan Association for Middle East Studies*, No. 15 (2000), pp. 1-26 (9).

all equal.”<sup>18</sup> This cross-class unification brought about by the destruction of previous class system gives ‘Ādil the opportunity which he would otherwise not have had to feel and experience the pain of the lower classes. He decides to support his co-workers and attempts to organise a Palestinian workers’ union in Israeli factories.

Despite the fact that ‘Ādil’s work inside the ‘green line’ is seen as a pragmatic attempt “to reconcile the competing needs of the national struggle and every day survival”,<sup>19</sup> it disappoints Usāmah and complicates the latter’s mission to blow up the Egged buses that take Palestinian workers to Israeli factories. However, Usāmah’s disappointment with his people’s apparent surrender to the circumstances imposed by the Israeli occupation does not preclude him from seeing the activism and hope embodied in his cousin Bāssel and the latter’s friends. These young men express awareness of the increased danger that Palestinians face in the occupied territories if the social conditions are to remain the same. One of these enthusiastic young men says:

Look, this is the situation. First, at elementary school, we’re repressed and tamed. Then, at secondary school, our personalities are crushed. In high school they foist an obsolete curriculum on us and our families begin pressuring us to get the highest grades so we can become doctors and engineers. Once we’ve actually become doctors and engineers, they demand that we pay them back for the cost of our studies. And our parents don’t work their fingers to the bone paying for our education so that we’ll return and work for peanuts at home. So the only solution is emigration, which means working in Saudi Arabia, Libya and the Gulf. What’s the result of all this? Educated people leave the country, and only workers and peasants remain. And that’s exactly what Israel wants to happen. But whether it’s workers and peasants or doctors and engineers who stay, our mentality and our activity remain the same. We’re humble

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<sup>18</sup> Khalīfah (2005), pp. 52, 61.

<sup>19</sup> Song, ‘The Writing of Sahar Khalifah’, p. 6.

in spirit, feeble-hearted. Men who work like machines, too scared to say “no” to anything.<sup>20</sup>

By means of this particular illustration, Khalīfah exposes the social structure within which Palestinians have to survive under the Israeli occupation. The social pressure and economic situation that force Palestinians into emigration helps to fasten the grip around Palestinians and hamper the process of resistance and its ultimate goal of freedom.

This is further explained through Usāmah’s contemplation of the impact of isolation on Palestinians in the occupied territories. He says: “The area where they now stood, bounded by the river on one side and enemy fortifications of the other, had become a major threat to revolutionary thought in the whole region. For the people had become soft, been brainwashed with lies and Israeli cash.”<sup>21</sup> For Usāmah, it is this kind of isolation that resulted in the lack of awareness among Palestinians in the occupied territories of the dangers of working in Israeli factories. Usāmah’s vision, however, remains incomplete: his judgment is one-sided since he did not live under the social and economic pressures imposed by the Israeli occupation. The subsequent conflict between ‘Ādil and Usāmah, “between pragmatic and radical revolution”,<sup>22</sup> is ensued by Usāmah’s short-sightedness.

Nevertheless, Usāmah considers Bāssel and his friends as potential future allies. Their argument reassures him that, despite the seemingly hopeless situation, these young men represent hope through their faith in the resistance movement as the only

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<sup>20</sup> Khalīfah (2005), pp. 59-60.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>22</sup> Song, ‘The Writing of Sahar Khalifah’, p. 6.

way to liberate their land.<sup>23</sup> With such faith and out of desperation of the situation, Bāssel helps Usāmah in hiding some leaflets and weapons in the family's house, an action which ultimately leads to the destruction of the family's long-established house and the fleeing of Bāssel to the mountains to join the fidā'een fighters.

Within this setting beset by social and economic pressures, Khalīfah introduces us to her female characters: Nūwār and Līnā. Nūwār, 'Ādil's younger sister, is introduced as a beautiful young woman who is trying to be strong in facing the complex situation in Nāblus and the hardships of survival both as a woman and as a Palestinian. She wants to finish her studies and find employment in order to help 'Ādil in supporting the family.<sup>24</sup> Within her conservative family, Nūwār is determined to reject the pattern of a traditional arranged marriage and to be faithful to her boyfriend, Ṣāliḥ, the imprisoned guerrilla fighter.

Līnā is introduced as "a short, slim girl"<sup>25</sup> with a boyish look who is subsequently arrested for her involvement in resistance activities with Bāssel and Usāmah. It is worth highlighting that the way each of the girls is introduced, and their physicality is in relation to her role: Nūwār is a beautiful girl whose main concern is her relationship with Ṣāliḥ, Līnā's tom-boyish look corresponds to her resistance activities which is typically assigned to men. Nūwār's weak personality is illustrated by her incapability to defend her right to choose her future husband against the will of her father and the absolute patriarchal power which he represents. In this sense, Nūwār is

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<sup>23</sup> See Elizabeth Brooks, *Paradise Lost, and Lost Again: Limitations and Realities of Palestinian Identity in Exile, Occupied Palestine and Israel*, MA Diss., (Raleigh: North Carolina State University, 2003), p. 61.

<sup>24</sup> See Khalīfah (2005), p. 34.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

emblematic of a type of young woman who is fully absorbed by her emotional and personal problems and who is therefore disinterested in the national cause.

In general, however, women are marginalised within the narrative of *Wild Thorns*. Apart from Nūwār and Līnā, reference is made briefly to other women such as Um Usāmāh, Um ‘Ādil, Um Ṣābir,<sup>26</sup> and Sa‘diyyah (Zuhdī’s wife). These women are engaged in stereotypically ‘feminine’ activities: they are absorbed in maternal duties, in housework, prayer for their sons and husbands, and chant popular songs against the occupier with the neighbourhood children. Despite this, according to Harlow, these women’s “positioning on thresholds, in doorways, at the outskirts of the novel’s scenes, indicates their emergent role as decisive agents in the recasting of the Palestinian national narrative.”<sup>27</sup>

The presence of these women characters is important even though they seem stereotypically passive. Their resistance to oppression is subtly hinted at through the instances in which they support and protect their families and the guerrilla fighters. Um Usāmāh endures the humiliation at the hands of Israeli soldiers so as to protect her son. Other women block the way of Israeli soldiers; they shout and scream at them to give some time to the men of their families to hide or run away. Such contributions of women to the struggle from within their socially and culturally proscribed feminine

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<sup>26</sup> ‘Um’ means ‘mother’ in Arabic. Women in the Arab world are called after the name of their first son. The reference to Sa‘diyyah by her name rather the traditional way, is an indication of her independence that will crystallise in *Sunflower*.

<sup>27</sup> Barbara Harlow, ‘Partitions and Precedents: Sahar Khalifeh and Palestinian Political Geography’, in *Intersections: Gender, Nation, and Community in Arab Women’s Novels*, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2002), pp. 113-131 (116).

spaces and roles are meant to attest to Khalīfah's prediction that "the revolution had to be accomplished from within and by a new cadre – women and children."<sup>28</sup>

Therefore, in her representation of women, Khalīfah remains faithful to the historical facts. As early as the post 1967 June war, Palestinian women, especially middle-aged women from middle and lower classes, had very limited participation in general social activities, let alone as actors in the resistance movement. Their roles did not exceed the limits of protecting and supporting men fighting against the occupation. Yet, that period witnessed the beginning of women's participation in national struggle. The examples of Līnā, the girl arrested at the checkpoint, and the woman with the plaster cast in the taxi illustrate women who are active in the resistance movement at that time, but only as exceptions to the rule. However, Palestinian women's social and political roles have increased gradually due to social and cultural changes but also because of the increasing necessity of women's participation in the ongoing conflict. This is reflected in Khalīfah's later novels.<sup>29</sup>

Khalīfah's *Wild Thorns* relates two stories of political detention, "a topos already long crucial to classic resistance narratives".<sup>30</sup> The first is Bāssel's story: he is arrested for the first time for his participation in a demonstration against the Israeli occupation. While in prison, Bāssel is introduced through 'the detainees' clandestine organization' to a new type of education that includes "political lessons, poetry competitions, the regular sessions of the 'people's school' . . . and evening

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<sup>28</sup> Cooke (1996), p. 200.

<sup>29</sup> For more information about Palestinian women's early participation in political activities and the gradual increase of their active political roles see Saḥar Khalīfeh, *Reflections on the Crisis of the Educated Palestinian Woman in Sahar Khalifeh's Works*, MA Diss., (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1983), pp. 5-12.

<sup>30</sup> Harlow, 'Partitions and Precedents', p. 119.

assemblies”.<sup>31</sup> This kind of education raises Bāssel’s awareness and understanding of the realities of occupation and organised resistance. With such new awareness, Bāssel joins a group of guerrilla fighters in their activities after he is released from prison.

The second story is of Zuhdī’s imprisonment: troubled by his son’s detention and the increased pressures of curfew, Zuhdī tries to live peaceably and avoid a fight with Shlomo, an Israeli co-worker, who aggravates him in a provocative conversation. Zuhdī loses his temper with Shlomo’s racist utterance: ‘dirty Arabs’.<sup>32</sup> This results in a fight between Palestinian and Israeli workers. Consequently, Zuhdī is put into prison where, like Bāssel, he acquires a new education. He also has the chance to observe “the processes of social ostracization of suspected collaborators, the pain and anguish of family visits, and the brutalities of solitary confinement.”<sup>33</sup> Using these two parallel stories, Khalīfah exposes a crucial side of organised Palestinian resistance movement; that is, ‘the detainees’ clandestine organization’. In this way, the prison becomes another frontier of resistance against the occupier.

Meanwhile, Usāmah assassinates a high ranking officer in the Israeli army before fleeing to the mountains to join the fidā’een. ‘Ādil appears in the scene that takes place in the market right after the assassination. He ignores people’s warnings to run away and leave the Israeli family. Instead, he comforts the Israeli officer’s wife, tears the stars off the officer’s uniform, and carries his unconscious daughter. ‘Ādil’s human action illustrates sympathy with the Israeli family, acknowledges their humanity, and

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<sup>31</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>32</sup> See Khalīfah (2005), p. 112.

<sup>33</sup> Harlow, ‘Partitions and Precedents’, p. 120. It is worth mentioning that Harlow confuses/mixes Bāssel’s experience in prison with that of Zuhdī. She mistakenly quotes Zuhdī’s narration of his experience in prison to his family as Bāssel’s. See Khalīfah (2005), p. 176.

opposes violence from the Palestinian resistance. By tearing the stars from the officer's uniform, 'Ādil prioritises the humanity of his enemy. By means of such examples, "Khalīfah captures many complexities of the Palestinian-Israeli opposition here: just as the Israelis are not dehumanised in the novel, neither are the Palestinian characters portrayed as blind to the humanity of the 'enemy'." <sup>34</sup> Khalīfah emphasises this notion in other examples such as Um Ṣābir's sympathy with the officer's wife and daughter in the same assassination scene. Though she was cursing them vehemently minutes before the accident, Um Ṣābir murmurs phrases of sympathy to both the wife and the daughter while covering the exposed legs of the unconscious daughter. The other example is the meeting of the little boy Niḍāl with his imprisoned father. This scene moves everyone who witnesses this reunion, even the Israeli guards.

It is worth mentioning that Khalīfah, in scenes such as the Israeli officer's assassination, reveals how women address the conflict in a way different from men's: women tend to "recognize and negotiate with the humanity of the enemy." <sup>35</sup> Brooks considers Khalīfah's use of "two women to illustrate this shared humanity [as] significant in itself and can be seen as a feminist stance that perhaps women hold the key to peace." <sup>36</sup> Through such illustrations, Khalīfah's work sets feminist causes in parallel to nationalist ones: were they given more freedom, women would have participated in the conflict with the attempt of bringing peace. It is interesting that both Zeidan and Brooks highlight the last two examples over 'Ādil's human action. <sup>37</sup> I would like to argue that 'Ādil's action, however, are more important since in reality

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<sup>34</sup> Zeidan (1995), p. 180.

<sup>35</sup> Cooke (1996), p. 201.

<sup>36</sup> Brooks (2003), p. 69.

<sup>37</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 68-70 and Zeidan (1995), pp. 179-180.



Palestinian society is still a patriarchal society. Hence, if any change were to take place, it would have to be through men. This is further illustrated in the closing scene of the novel.<sup>38</sup>

Back in Nāblus, Līnā is arrested and Bāssel is anxious that she might confess, an act which might lead to his arrest and the blowing up of the family's house by the Israelis. Yet in an act of audacity out of despair with his brother's and sister's cowardice towards their father, Bāssel announces to his father the shocking news of 'Ādil's work in the Israeli factories and the scandal of Nūwār's relationship with Ṣāliḥ. Bāssel's standing up for his sister's rights is considered important by Zeidan since it supports

the notion that men must participate in the break with oppressive traditions, because they are in power where these issues are concerned and it is men's reactions to such a challenge that, understandably, many women fear. This is addressed as a factor in the general struggle to be free, suggesting that it is in Palestine's best interests to fight for the freedom of all of its citizens.<sup>39</sup>

Therefore, Khalīfah sets women's freedom as an integral part of the cause of freedom in Palestinian society. In this sense, the process by which women can find liberation is analogous to that by which land can be liberated.

Bāssel's confessions come just before the Israeli soldiers break into al-Karmī's house. He flees through the neighbours' roofs to join the fidā'een. The last chapter depicts the solidarity between al-Karmī's neighbours' and 'Ādil's friends. Everyone offers help to the afflicted family to evacuate their house before it is blown up by the

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<sup>38</sup> It is noteworthy that Cooke considers 'Ādil's human action as a result of "learning from women's ways of knowing and acting," which helps men like 'Ādil to "cease to fear and reject the feminine, the tender, in themselves." See Cooke (1996), p. 201. It is not my intention here to delve into such analysis. It is interesting, however, to note that Cooke regards such representation of the "recognition of the human" as a way in which Khalīfah further expands her call to include men.

<sup>39</sup> Zeidan (1995), p. 182.

Israelis in retaliation for Bāssel's activism. Such scenes in Khalīfah's novels portray the strong social ties and solidarity that bring people together during hard times. This cultural aspect plays a major role in ensuring community survival under the occupation.

During the evacuation, 'Ādil deliberately leaves behind his father's dialysis machine to be blown up with the house. This can be seen as a sign of 'Ādil's rejection of his father's power over the house and his weariness of working in vain to afford the costs of this machine and keep his father alive. The father can be considered to represent the long-standing traditions which no longer have power in the new political realities of life in the occupied territories. 'Ādil's interior monologue appositely illustrates the situation: "if my father goes on living, we'll all die ... Me, Nuwar, the children. Haven't we lost enough already? Usama, Basil, the family estate. And all in self-defence. In defence of a dignified, honourable life. Let my father die! . . . [I've] carried him for a long time. But when his existence becomes a threat to [my] own humanity ...".<sup>40</sup> 'Ādil's action is an attempt to free himself from these traditional restraints, represented by his father's enduring patriarchal bourgeoisie power: a means of starting afresh.<sup>41</sup> 'Ādil longs to deploy his energy in coping with the harsh reality of occupation rather than exploiting it to preserve the family's prestigious, yet worthless, history represented by his father. Through this action 'Ādil abandons his bourgeois background.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Khalīfah (2005), p. 204.

<sup>41</sup> See Cooke (1996), p. 199.

<sup>42</sup> See Hanan Mikhail-Ashrawi, *The Contemporary Literature of Palestine: Poetry and Fiction*, PhD Diss., (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1982), p. 268.

- **SUNFLOWER**

*Wild Thorns* is dedicated to Abu al-‘Izz;<sup>43</sup> the title Bāssel is given upon his imprisonment. Yet ‘Ādil remains the central character in this novel and its sequel, *Sunflower*. While *Wild Thorns* closes with ‘Ādil’s thoughts after the family’s house has been blown up, *Sunflower* opens with ‘Ādil in the company of Rafīf, one of the main female characters in this second novel. She is introduced as a middle-class intellectual and an energetic young woman. They both work in the same magazine where Rafīf runs the women’s column. In this opening scene, she is upset with the political and social situation in the West Bank and expresses her frustration in a fit of anger directed towards ‘Ādil and the patriarchal and bourgeois attitude which she perceives him to represent.<sup>44</sup> With Rafīf’s character, Khalīfah sets the Palestinian women’s cause at the centre of *Sunflower*—next to the national cause, as opposed to only analysing different political positions as was the case in *Wild Thorns*.<sup>45</sup>

The first two chapters portray both of these main characters as lost; both are seeking to fit their intellectual liberalism into the traditional style of life in occupied Palestine. ‘Ādil is aware that Rafīf will not respond to his desires because she is an Arab woman “who refuses but to be a ḥurmah”<sup>46</sup> (a woman under the protection of a man). For him, she is not independent and confident enough to be liberal in her actions.

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<sup>43</sup> See Saḥar Khalīfah, *Al-Ṣabbār*, (Bayrūt: Dār al-Ādāb, 1976), p. 5. I refer to the Arabic edition of the novel as this dedication is not mentioned in the English translation. Abu al-‘Izz, is a courtesy nickname that was given to Bāssel upon his imprisonment. The name translates literally as ‘father of glory or honour’. This title is meant to indicate that Bāssel’s participation in the demonstration which resulted in his imprisonment is a brave action that transforms him from a boy to a man. For more information see Song, ‘The Writing of Saḥar Khalifah’, p. 6.

<sup>44</sup> Saḥar Khalīfah, *‘Abbād al-Shams: Takmilat Al-Ṣabbār (Sunflower: the Sequel to Wild Thorns)*, (Bayrūt: Dār al-Ādāb, 1987; 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1980), pp. 9-13.

<sup>45</sup> See Mikhail-Ashrawi (1982), pp. 262-263.

<sup>46</sup> Khalīfah (1987), p. 19.

Her objections against their conservative society are considered by him to be childish behaviour, not constitutive of revolutionary actions that can overthrow the status quo.

Meanwhile, Rafīf is hesitant about trusting him:

She knows that he does not love her, and that he does not need her. His need for her is momentary, temporary. Any other woman can satisfy his temporary needs. She refuses to be involved in temporal superficial relationships. A relationship has to be serious. Everything has to be deep and intense to give life meaning, taste and an outcome. Everything has to bring the human being closer to the heart of the world, the source of warmth, the womb of life. And there lies freedom. But freedom needs strong, healthy people. Yet the Arab man is still sick, suffering from dualism as he wants one thing and performs another. The Arab man is still attached to the past and chants the future. She learned this from her experiences, her female friends' experiences, and the woman's column. Arab men are victims, exactly like Arab women. Yet their situation is worse as they are the strongest and the haughtiest. This is the truth. She will not be a victim of the victim. But then, there is loneliness.<sup>47</sup>

With such representation, Khalīfah tackles the dualism from which young men and women suffer in occupied Palestine, in particular, and in other countries of the Levant, more generally speaking. This dualism is the product of the conflict between the liberal progressive concepts they believe in and their inability to put their beliefs into practice because of traditional social restrictions.<sup>48</sup>

Both 'Ādil and Rafīf are incapable of expressing and fulfilling their desires. On the one hand, 'Ādil believes that Rafīf remains a traditional suppressed 'Eastern' woman despite her liberal feminist proclivities. On the other hand, she cannot trust his attitude out of fear that he is only another 'Eastern' man who will mistreat her after fulfilling his desires. Both of them use the word 'Eastern' to refer to backward

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>48</sup> It is worth mentioning that in this case, Khalīfah describes the duality of Palestinian leftists. See Khalīfeh (1983), p. 26.

traditional behaviour imposed on them by their society. However, Rafīf's fears crystallise in her realisation that: "they [men] apply on the public [al-‘Ām] what they do not apply on the private [al-Khās]. . . . Is national cause different from women's cause? . . . The women's cause is an essential part of national cause."<sup>49</sup> By 'public' Rafīf refers to the Palestinian situation; by 'private' she refers to the situation of Palestinian women.

Rafīf feels that 'Ādil's progressive attitude towards liberating the land is different from his attitude towards women's liberation. She senses that he believes in a disciplined national struggle; at the same time he asks her implicitly to have a physical relationship with him without any commitments. This example illustrates Rafīf's concern with "the status of woman in the theory and practice of the revolutionary Palestinian-Arab-Muslim man."<sup>50</sup> Through Rafīf's contemplation, Khalīfah renders the feminist and nationalist dimensions in *Sunflower* parallel. In this sense, Khalīfah underpins the importance of approaching women's freedom with the same liberal attitude with which Arab men approach the national cause.

The other female protagonist in *Sunflower* is Sa'diyyah; Zuhdī's wife. Her character "contributes to a greater understanding of the majority of women under occupation."<sup>51</sup> Yet she is singled out as a strong and uneducated working woman. After the death of her husband in a fight between Israeli soldiers and the guerrilla fighters of which he was one, Sa'diyyah is left alone with the significant responsibility of taking care of her children. She starts working as a seamstress for an Israeli textile company to

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<sup>49</sup> Khalīfah (1987), p. 17. See also pp. 118-9.

<sup>50</sup> Siddiq, 'The Fiction of Sahar Khalifah', p. 157.

<sup>51</sup> Mikhail-Ashrawi (1982), p. 270.

earn a respectful living. Her traditional community, however, does not accept any job that involves dealing with men, even if only occasionally.

Through Sa'diyyah's story, Khalīfah exposes another dilemma that faces Palestinian women under occupation and within their restricted Palestinian communities; that is, the predicament of single or divorced women who have to survive financially and socially by themselves in such traditional communities. Yet it is Sa'diyyah's work that shapes her personality with a strength and confidence that is missing in *Wild Thorns*. This self-confidence makes 'Ādil respect her more given her struggle against hard conditions, and her ability to establish herself as a successful and respectable working woman.<sup>52</sup>

While the character of Rafīf represents the dilemma of the Palestinian intellectual woman, Sa'diyyah's character stands for lower middle-class illiterate women. The former expresses an awareness of the rights that she cannot enjoy equally with her male colleagues and the ability to be in a healthy relationship with the man she loves. The latter portrays the desire to earn a decent living to support her little children and the need for male protection regardless of any other feminist or human rights. Both representations are set against the same background: traditional Palestinian community under Israeli occupation. Both characters reflect a harsh reality that exists in present Palestine in two different social classes. Furthermore, the complexities of both characters' situation and their "personal growth [arise] from external influences like the

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<sup>52</sup> See Khalīfah (1987), pp. 22-5.

national struggle, rather than internal awareness.”<sup>53</sup> In this we find further evidence of the inseparable link between feminist and nationalist causes in Khalīfah’s writing.

Sa’diyyah contracts with an Israeli textile company in Tel Aviv. In one of her business trips to deliver the products she meets Khaḍrah, another important female character, who is introduced as a prostitute. Khaḍrah comes from a simple rural family. After losing their land to the Israelis and the death of her mother, they found themselves displaced between different camps. Her father married her off for a good dowry that enabled him to buy a wheeled carriage. Khaḍrah’s husband was already married and had children who were older than her. He beat her for no reason, so she ran away, leaving her children behind. She married again an ill old man whom she supports by working as a prostitute. She loves him for the mere fact that he treats her well, a treatment which she never experienced from her father or first husband.<sup>54</sup> Through Khaḍrah’s character, Khalīfah illustrates the effects of violence on women. While Sa’diyyah tries to challenge the confinement of traditional social roles and to liberate herself through her hard work and success in business, Khaḍrah liberates herself by violating social customs and morals.<sup>55</sup> Both women are victims of social and political oppression. Nevertheless, Sa’diyyah stands as a positive, yet rare, example of a strong woman who faces the harsh realities of the occupation and restricted social traditions with patience and hard work.

Other characters that were introduced briefly in *Wild Thorns* are given more space in *Sunflower*; Shaḥādah is one of them. As a child, he used to work with his father

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<sup>53</sup> Song, ‘The Writing of Sahar Khalifah’, p. 13.

<sup>54</sup> See Khalīfah (1987), pp. 85-7.

<sup>55</sup> See Mikhail-Ashrawi (1982), p. 271.

in al-Karmī's farm. In the post-1967 period and the Israeli occupation, Shaḥādah was given the chance to leave the farm and work with Israelis. Yet he always experiences a complex anxiety that he belongs neither to the Arab nor the Israeli communities. His money does not give him the sense of respect that he wished for; rather, it intensifies his sense of inferiority to others such as 'Ādil and his reputable family.<sup>56</sup> This inferiority prevents healthy communication between Shaḥādah and others. In *Wild Thorns*, Usāmah is disgusted by Shaḥādah's arrogant and condescending attitude. The latter flaunts his newly improved finances to show al-Karmī that he has moved up in class rank by not working for them anymore. Here class struggle is highlighted as another issue that dominates relationships within the occupied territories and hinders a collective collaboration among Palestinians in their struggle.

Meanwhile, Nūwār is frustrated with waiting for Ṣāliḥ who is still in prison. She admits to 'Ādil that her emotions towards Ṣāliḥ are not as strong as they used to be. She needs a man who can physically be with her even if this means being in a traditional relationship.<sup>57</sup> Yet Nūwār does not take any action to change her status quo. Rafīf, however—who is also frustrated with her relationship with 'Ādil, her weakness towards him, and the feeling of inferiority to him—decides to take action. She starts by ignoring 'Ādil. In order to prove her independence, she proposes a new project to the magazine that demands giving the women's column half the magazine. Her argument is based on her belief that, since women constitute half of society, they deserve to be assigned half the magazine in comparison to the small 'corner' the women's column is assigned.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> See Khalīfah (1987), pp. 26-7.

<sup>57</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>58</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 123-4.



Rafīf thinks of this project as her only chance to tackle women's issues more seriously; she wants to educate women through her writings. The column, however, is not enough as it has been dedicated to secondary issues such as cookery and beauty. Rafīf's attitude demonstrates a growth in her personality as a woman and a feminist. As a woman she tries to liberate herself from being dependent on 'Ādil. At the same time, she attempts to put her feminist beliefs into practice through her column in the magazine. Therefore, Rafīf's rebellion is directed simultaneously against 'Ādil's patriarchal attitude and the magazine's hierarchal structure; resistance to both is interconnected.

Through *al-Balad* magazine in which both 'Ādil and Rafīf work, Khalīfah addresses the issue of Palestinian intellectuals' reaction to the occupation and their actions in means of liberating the land and the people; the theme which was not tackled in *Wild Thorns*. 'Ādil advocates Palestinian workers' rights through his articles. He aims at bringing a critical change through his suggested project of publishing a literary supplement that contains the translations of Arabic literature into Hebrew and vice versa. In this way, they will raise the awareness of both Palestinians and Israeli activists of the realities of the occupation through literature. This can be regarded as a continuation to 'Ādil's human stance from the occupation; in contrast to violence, dialogue with the enemy is one way of bringing peace. In the same way, Rafīf's articles aim at raising women's awareness of their rights. She justifies her project as more important than 'Ādil's project by the fact that they need to liberate women who constitute half of society first in order to be able to liberate the country.

On the one hand, 'Ādil's project is not approved because the magazine's committee is uncertain with which language to start the supplement since both Arabic

and Hebrew are written from the right to the left. On the other hand, Rafīf's project is also rejected by the same committee. Rafīf is the only woman on the magazine's committee. She demands as necessary a change in how the magazine addresses women by changing the predominantly sexist material into educational material that provides women with solutions to their problems and offers insights towards the creation of a better society. This suggestion is totally rejected by the men of the committee who instead praise the benefits of the beauty and kitchen sections.<sup>59</sup> Through this incident, Khalīfah skilfully portrays the intellectuals' stance towards women's rights and the chasm which exists between their theories and practice. Khalīfah presents this as a major reason for the slow improvement of the situation of Palestinian women specifically and Levantine women generally.<sup>60</sup>

*Sunflower* closes with a clash between Israeli soldiers and Palestinians whose lands have been confiscated by the Israelis. Sa'diyyah is one of these people; the land that she recently bought represents her only hope of having a decent life away from the old district at the heart of Nablus. She is vexed by people's judgement of her because of her job and independence. She had been hoping to escape the neighbourhood and its social restrictions by purchasing this plot of land for herself. Sa'diyyah joins people at the house of the village's mayor to see if anything can be done. Rafīf, 'Ādil, Bāssel, and others are there to cover the incident. Sa'diyyah meets Rafīf when the latter tries to interview Sa'diyyah, but she believes that there is no way for Rafīf to feel and

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<sup>59</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 125-136. See also Mikhail-Ashrawi (1982), pp. 267-268.

<sup>60</sup> Khalīfah states that in *Sunflower*, al-Balad magazine "symbolizes the complex Palestinian institution in general, with its hierarchy and different conflicting ideologies. Examples of how the magazine is structured and how it functions will operate in the way the editorial board deals with the 'Woman's Corner,' which Rafīf edits." See Khalīfeh (1983), p. 25.

understand her pain: “How could a woman like you understand a woman like me? You have no child, have not experienced widowhood, had not lost a land, no sewing machines, no needles”.<sup>61</sup> This illustrates the distance that separates intellectual women in occupied Palestine from ordinary women. Cooke acknowledges that “Rafif recognizes Sa’adiya’s charges as identical to those she herself makes to male colleagues, and this realization renders her believable and vulnerable. She is not a transparent symbol, but rather an individual torn between political agendas, social realities, and personal weakness.”<sup>62</sup>

Such incidents also highlight that Palestinian women’s problems can be examined from the perspective of the dual nature of the oppression they endure: as women and as Palestinians. The first major struggle is twofold: their exclusion from and suppression by their patriarchal society and their distance from intellectual leftist women. The unravelling of such realities by Khalifah underpins the urgent need for finding a common ground for intellectual feminists to grow closer to ordinary oppressed women. The characters of Sa’diyyah and Rafif pinpoint the different problems Palestinian women have to overcome in different classes within the harsh circumstances imposed by the occupation. Moreover, these two characters demonstrate the double oppression Palestinian women have to endure both from their society as women, and from the occupiers as Palestinians. These two female characters, and Rafif in particular, stand for “Palestinian women who succeed in establishing their identity by developing a feminist consciousness merged with a commitment to the national struggle.”<sup>63</sup> By

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<sup>61</sup> Khalifah (1987), p. 268.

<sup>62</sup> Cooke (1996), p. 203.

<sup>63</sup> Song, ‘The Writing of Sahar Khalifah’, p. 11.

means of this elaboration, feminist causes and nationalist causes are set as parallels in Khalīfah's novels.

In order to control people's anger, Israeli soldiers hold captive all the men of the village including Sa'diyyah's son, Rashād. Out of despair, sadness, and frustration, Sa'diyyah and other women attack these soldiers. Meanwhile peace activists are marching in protest against the Israelis actions of confiscating the lands, and of torturing innocent people. The novel closes with these unarmed women fighting armed Israeli soldiers to rescue their innocent sons, husbands, and brothers. This closing scene highlights simultaneously the early signs of the eruption of the first Palestinian Intifada and the beginning of Palestinian women's serious participation in the actual collective fight against the Israelis.

Khalīfah ends *Sunflower* with the phrase 'the end of the second part, finished'. Nevertheless, there are some indicators that the sequel has not finished yet. For instance, most of the incidents of *Sunflower* take place in 'Bāb al-Sāḥah', a public square in old town Nāblus.<sup>64</sup> This may be seen as an indirect link between the first two novels and *Bāb al-Sāḥah (The Gate of the Square)*. Moreover, the atmosphere of *The Gate*, its characters, and the way in which they are portrayed, are features that help to consolidate the argument for the status of *The Gate* as the third sequel to *Wild Thorns* and *Sunflower*.

- **THE GATE OF THE SQUARE**

Like *Wild Thorns* and *Sunflower*, Khalīfah's *The Gate of the Square* is set in the West Bank town of Nāblus amid the turbulence of the first Palestinian Intifada (1987-

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<sup>64</sup> See Khalīfah (1987), p. 22.

1993). *The Gate*'s narrative revolves mainly around the stories of four women both the lower and middle classes: the midwife Zakiyyah, her sister in law Um 'Azzām, the social sciences student Samar, and Nuzha; Sakīnah's daughter. The four women's lives intersect in al-Dār al-Mashbouha; 'the house of ill-repute' owned by Sakīnah. After the death of Sakīnah's husband, the young widow had to find a way to earn a living to bring up her children. Having no education, she started working as a seamstress—an end similar to the predicament of Sa'diyyah. With the increase of financial pressures due to the Israeli occupation, Sakīnah turns her house into a house of entertainment where her daughters and she entertain the guests who are rich Palestinian merchants and traders and even sometimes Israelis. Eventually, Sakīnah and her daughters are assumed to be prostitutes.

Generally speaking, in a Middle Eastern context, such a house would be accused of being of "ill-repute": a brothel. In the first half of the novel, there is ambiguity whether the house is a brothel or not. This is illustrated by the general female gossip which circulates, despite the lack of concrete proof that the house and its inhabitants are 'dishonoured'. Yet, towards the middle of the novel, Khalīfah indicates the identity of the house as a brothel by Nuzha's desperate confession.<sup>65</sup> Interestingly, however, the fidā'een, later, kill Sakīnah because she hosts Israelis in this house. They accuse her of being a spy for the Israelis, in addition to being a fallen woman. The house's "own local history nonetheless recapitulates the significant pressures on the social order in which it is situated"<sup>66</sup> and the effects of such social pressures on these four women's lives at the specific time of the Intifada. Such 'pressures' are symbolised by Khalīfah as serving

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<sup>65</sup> See Saḥar Khalīfah, *Bāb al-Sāḥah (The Gate of the Square)*, (Bayrūt: Dār al-Ādāb, 1990), p. 120.

<sup>66</sup> Harlow, 'Partitions and Precedents', pp. 115-6, 124-5.

only “to divide the community against itself and to undermine its ability to resist. As long as women continue to be valued for the sexual purity of their bodies and not for their effective participation in the resistance, the nation will remain at the mercy of outsiders who know how to manipulate the culture against itself.”<sup>67</sup> Most of Khalīfah’s female characters embody such manipulation: Samar and Nuzha in *The Gate* and Sa’diyyah, Rafīf, and Khaḍrah in the previous two novels.

*The Gate* opens with the midwife Zakiyyah holding a funeral reception in her house for her step-mother. She is introduced as a respectable middle-aged woman. She supports and hides her nephew Ḥussām—one of the guerrilla fighters—and his comrades in her house. Zakiyyah’s character is central in *The Gate* in the sense that she is representative of middle-class Palestinian women’s attitudes towards the occupation and towards social traditions. While Zakiyyah and other women of her generation do their best to protect the fidā’een and support the Intifada, they preserve the social structure of the Palestinian society regardless of the newly imposed changes by the occupation.

This is brought to light through the research undertaken by Samar, a social sciences student. While trying to answer Samar’s questionnaire, Zakiyyah highlights the new range of responsibilities and problems Palestinian women have to deal with after the break of the Intifada. In her attempt to answer Samar’s question of “what changes have taken place for women during the Intifada”,<sup>68</sup> Zakiyyah says: “Frankly, nothing

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<sup>67</sup> Cooke (1996), p. 213.

<sup>68</sup> Khalīfah (1990), p. 20.

has changed except their distress. There is more distress for them.... They have more and more worries, still the old ones and the new ones just multiply.”<sup>69</sup>

Zakiyyah is in a sense referring to an earlier feminist struggle during the colonial years when Arab women participated in anticolonial wars led mainly by men; yet those women were sent back to their confined spaces at the end of the fight. This recalls some scenes in *Sunflower* where Rafīf refers to women’s experience in Turkey, Iran, and Algeria as examples of what Palestinian women will face at the end of the conflict. Rafīf is convinced that history repeats itself: unless Palestinian women find a way to participate in the fight while preserving their rights as women and human beings, they will be sent back to resume their socially and politically inferior positions.<sup>70</sup>

Therefore, this temporary change in women’s positions is not considered, by either character, as a permanent transformation. Rather it was an expansion of the domestic boundaries to include the street and the battlefield where husbands, sons, and brothers are fighting against Israelis to liberate the land. Women’s responsibilities and worries have grown with this expansion while the nature of their spaces and subsequently their rights has remained mostly the same. Like Sa‘diyyah; Zakiyyah, Um al-Ṣādiq and other women are faced with the responsibility of hiding and protecting the fidā’een, and taking care of the families in the absence of men who join the resistance. Women’s new responsibilities are to be perpetrated within the same social constraints imposed by their patriarchal societies. Hence the expansion of their duties is not accompanied by a similar and appropriate expansion of their rights and spaces.

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<sup>69</sup> Harlow, ‘Partitions and Precedents’, p. 129, referring to Khalīfah (1990), p. 20.

<sup>70</sup> See Khalīfah (1987), pp. 246-7.

But Zakiyyah herself is complicit in the perpetuation of the system where ‘nothing has changed’. Her attitude is representative of many contemporary Levantine women’s. Daphne Spain reminds us that since “the powerful cannot maintain their positions without the cooperation of the less powerful . . . If a given stratification system is to persist, then, both powerful and less-powerful groups must be engaged in its constant renegotiation and re-creation.”<sup>71</sup> In the same way, some Middle Eastern women play a part in the assignment of their gendered spaces and the preservation of their traditional roles. Khalīfah illustrates such a situation when, in response to Um ‘Azzām’s complaint about her husband’s abusive conduct and “incorrigible practice of beating her”, Zakiyyah asks her to “lower her voice” as “someone might hear” her.<sup>72</sup> Zakiyyah then asks Um ‘Azzām to go back to her house and husband in order to avoid a social scandal, disregarding the poor woman’s suffering and pain. Zakiyyah would be more receptive to hearing from Um ‘Azzām about other problems such as Israeli soldiers breaking into her house, illness of her husband, or even her older son’s decision to reside permanently in the US.<sup>73</sup> With such an attitude, Zakiyyah wants to keep the social prestige of her family intact no matter what kind of suffering Um ‘Azzām is enduring.

This desire to preserve the status quo, even during the time of the Intifada, highlights some Palestinian women’s fear of challenging the prevailing social status quo. For Zakiyyah, social traditions and constraints are more important than Um ‘Azzām’s feelings of peace and dignity. However, Zakiyyah herself forgets that the

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<sup>71</sup> Daphne Spain, *Gendered Spaces*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), p. 17.

<sup>72</sup> Harlow, ‘Partitions and Precedents’, pp. 127-8, referring to Khalīfah (1990), pp. 159-168.

<sup>73</sup> See Khalīfah (1990), pp. 156-7.



conversation with Um ‘Azzām takes place in the house of ill-repute, a space in which they are not supposed to be, according to their respectable social status. Such a shift has been necessitated by the Intifada and its impositions. Usually, Zakiyyah would not pass the threshold into the ill-reputed house. She has, however, to go there when her nephew, Ḥussām, is injured during a conflict with the Israelis and has to hide in Nuzha’s house. In this way, the Intifada forces changes to the already established social customs and spaces; yet Zakiyyah is unable to apply the same shift to Um ‘Azzām’s case.

Ḥussām’s injury and his taking refuge in the house of the ill-reputed women shifts the narrative to Nuzha and the history of her house. Samar ventures to Nuzha’s house to include the latter in her research. Like Khaḍrah in *Sunflower*, Nuzha had been married off to an older man at the age of fifteen. After the death of her father, her mother wanted to be released from her daughters’ responsibility by marrying them off to whomever happened to propose. However, Nuzha left her husband and son and ran away with a hairdresser, who himself later rejected her. She returned to the West Bank and fell in love with one of the fidā’een; ‘Āṣim al-Marbūṭ. The latter used Nuzha in operations for the fidā’een. Both Nuzha and ‘Āṣim were arrested, however, the latter claimed that Nuzha and her mother were the cause of the failure of certain operations and of his arrest. As a consequence, Nuzha’s mother was killed by the fidā’een for being accused of being a collaborator and a spy. Nuzha was beaten and threatened of facing the same death as her mother if she dared to work with the Israelis.

Such circumstances explain Nuzha’s isolation and her bitterness. She blames her circumstances and people’s blind attachment to social customs for her misery. Since she comes from the house of ill-repute, it was hard, even impossible, for her to erase this

stigma by getting involved in resistance activities. Even though Aḥmad, her younger brother, is one of the fidā'een, this does not erase the stigma from her; mainly because she is a woman and her actions will be always judged according to her family's history. Therefore, Nuzha's 'sexual purity' is given more importance than her 'effective participation in the resistance'. Such traditional social constraints help only to delay both social and national liberation.<sup>74</sup>

Samar finds herself imprisoned in Nuzha's house when a curfew is imposed on the neighbourhood. When she returns home after the lift of the curfew, she is beaten by her brother because she stayed away from their house for nine days, the thing which is not expected from an honourable woman. Her brother grows more furious when he finds that she was staying in the house of ill-repute; a fact that might affect the reputation and honour of the family. Samar's character is similar to Rafīf's in the sense that she is aware of gender discrimination in her society. She is also aware of the increasing pressure on Palestinian women after the eruption of the Intifada and she tries to understand its dimensions through her research. Yet, like Rafīf, Samar is trapped in the complicated social structure in Nāblus under the Israeli occupation. Both characters attempt to find a way to improve women's status within such closed communities and institutionalise their struggle against the Israelis and traditional customs. However, both novels close without any indication of the success of both women.

In *The Gate*, there are two incidents of women participating in the actual fight against the Israeli soldiers. The first one is when the women of Bāb al-Sāḥah's neighbourhood hide the fidā'een and protect them by getting involved in physical fight

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<sup>74</sup> See above pp. 251-53.

with the Israeli soldiers during a door to door search for the fidā'een. During this fight, Khalīfah's female characters react instinctively, and they are beaten by the soldiers. However, the women keep fighting until the Israelis give up on finding the fidā'een and leave the neighbourhood. In this sense, these women care more about the safety of the fidā'een, who represent patriarchal society, as part of their responsibility to ensure community survival.

The other incident is when Samar, Nuzha, and Zakiyyah cooperate together to destroy the new concrete gate set by the Israelis to block the entrance to Bāb al-Sāḥah and trap the fidā'een in that district. While the men's efforts were unsuccessful, these three women manage to dissolve the wet concrete structure of the huge gate during the night using a sugar-water solution.<sup>75</sup> In this sense, Khalīfah's novel displays examples of women's use of domestic and other simple materials in grass-roots activities. In the first fight, women were fighting the Israeli soldiers by hitting them with anything they find in their way. Samar was one of them. She, however, found herself helpless when she was beaten by her older brother for hiding in Nuzha's house during the nine days of the curfew.

While Samar was proud of herself during the fight against the Israeli soldiers, she felt extremely humiliated when her brother beat her. Though she does not feel the pain of the soldiers' blows, she is totally devastated by her brother's beating. This humiliation erases the success she had achieved with Nuzha and Zakiyyah by destroying the gate built by the Israelis.<sup>76</sup> Through such examples Khalīfah portrays masterfully how Palestinian women remain defeated by their conventional social

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<sup>75</sup> See Khalīfah (1990), p. 128.

<sup>76</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 136-7.

customs and restricted traditions. This social defeat affects their participation in the national struggle and turns their success into another demonstration of defeat. For these women to take an active part in the national fight, they need to be liberated first from patriarchal restrictions. Therefore, women's liberation in Khalīfah's novels can be seen as the necessary prelude to the liberation of the land; one kind of political transformation cannot take place without the other.

After the Israelis re-set the gate and make it bigger and stronger, made of stone this time, men and women work together to destroy the new gate. Many die in the fight, but the number of female martyrs on the gate is almost equal to male martyrs. Meanwhile, Aḥmad, Nuzha's younger brother, is killed during one of the clashes with Israeli soldiers. Aḥmad's martyrdom lifts the stigma from the house of ill-repute. People from Bāb al-Sāḥah and the surrounding neighbourhoods come to Sakīnah's house to comfort Nuzha and participate in the funeral of the martyr.<sup>77</sup> Earlier in the novel, the house of ill-repute becomes a space which shelters national symbols of resistance, the *fidā'een*—who are men fighting to liberate the country. In protecting the honour of the land, these men seek refuge in a feminine space which is socially and morally illegitimate or condemned.<sup>78</sup> This shift would only have happened in the exceptional circumstances of the liberation struggle. In the same way, Aḥmad's martyrdom changes people's attitude towards some of the long-established boundaries and customs. Such incidents during the daily fight in Palestine cause the gradual and exceptional intersection of masculine and feminine spaces and roles in occupied Palestine.

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<sup>77</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 215.

<sup>78</sup> I consider this space 'feminine' as it is owned and run by females who lead a dishonourable occupation according to their patriarchal Palestinian community. Men happen to occupy this space temporarily as guests.

The novel closes with Nuzha leading the women through secret path into the gate where she burns the Israeli flag.<sup>79</sup> It is only when Nuzha realises that she had to challenge gender roles to fully support the Intifada that she changes her actions. Despite all the disappointment and misery she had suffered because of the Intifada (which caused the loss of her mother, her beloved young brother, and most importantly her honour), Nuzha's previously passive role changes when she witnesses people change their attitude towards her. After the martyrdom of Aḥmad, the people of the neighbourhood express support, solidarity, and understanding. These incidents turn into a leading reaction joined by the other women of the district. The transformation in Nuzha's opposition to the Intifada illustrates the sacrifices and compromises Palestinian women make for the sake of national liberation. The closing scenes of both *Sunflower* and *The Gate*—with women committing resistance actions against the occupiers—underline the fact that for Khalīfah, “national struggle must necessarily be perceived through the eyes of women. This is a new and intriguing strategy completely missed by male writers [such as Kanafānī and Ḥabībī] who fail to grasp the notion of gender difference.”<sup>80</sup> Women's actions are dictated by their realisation of the established gendered hierarchies in Palestinian society which diminishes their feminist struggle and limits their participation in the national struggle.

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<sup>79</sup> See Khalīfah (1990), p. 222.

<sup>80</sup> Song, 'The Writing of Sahar Khalīfah', p. 17.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I propose in this chapter a new way of reading Khalifah's novels that perceives a meaningful structural and thematic organisation which binds her three works together. I consider *Wild Thorns*, *Sunflower*, and *The Gate* resistance literature in the way they narrate the daily struggle of Palestinians in the occupied territories. The first two novels are part of an interrelated sequence, while *The Gate* stands as a separate work that raises similar issues to those tackled in the first two novels. *The Gate* was published fourteen years after the publication of *Wild Thorns*. I regard this as an attempt by Khalifah to argue the fact that the Palestinian social structure has experienced a very little internal change, which in turn has resulted in even fewer changes on the political and feminist fronts. Therefore, the analysis of the incidents and characters of these three novels highlights their mutual prevalent themes and underpins the analogy between these three literary works. Accordingly, in this chapter I propose a new understanding of Khalifah's three novels as a trilogy.

In Khalifah's trilogy, the events develop alongside the historical period in which the novels were written. While the role of the resistance movement in exile was central in the post-1967 era, the importance given to the resistance from within the occupied territories increased with the eruption of the Intifada in 1987. Moreover, in her trilogy, Khalifah traces the development of Palestinians' struggle against the Israeli occupation. In the early period, men either left to join the resistance in exile or stayed and compromised (as is the case in *Wild Thorns*). Later, acts of 'military retaliation' without

consideration of the consequences was the common practice. According to Cooke, Khalīfah “demonstrates the bankruptcy of both ways of fighting.”<sup>81</sup>

This gradual transformation is powerfully portrayed by Khalīfah. In *Wild Thorns*, Usāmah’s return results in shocks and inner conflicts, that reflect masterfully the major role played by the resistance in exile. In *Sunflower*, this representation fades away gradually with scattered memories of Usāmah and his resistance activities. Instead, the novel provides a powerful representation of the detainees’ clandestine organisation. This representation nurtures the gradual growth of the resistance movement within the occupied territories which is demonstrated in *The Gate* by the increased portrayal of the activities of the local fidā’een and the eventual eruption of the first Intifada.

The suggestion advanced by the arguments in this chapter that these three works form a coherent trilogy is derived from techniques which are related to the structures of these novels and their narratives. For instance, Khalīfah uses the same geographical setting, discusses the same social taboos and customs, and deals with the same national and feminist struggles, yet at ever more advanced levels. These facts help in conceiving of the novels as a trilogy. In this, the question of using the same characters becomes of minor importance in establishing a number of works as trilogy—the themes and settings do this for us. The same approach may be followed by al-Sammān in establishing her quartet: al-Sammān does not use the same characters in the four novels, but weaves these works together through the use of common motifs, themes, and settings. However, unlike Khalīfah she re-calls her characters from *Beirut ’75* in *The First Billion* and

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<sup>81</sup> Cooke (1996), p. 198.

*Masquerade* by using techniques such as flashbacks and déjà vu. By means of this consideration, both writers can be seen as innovators in their representation of Palestinian and Lebanese societies. Furthermore, both writers pioneer this new style of literary narrative in which they create a series of works that can stand independently while still form a series. This fact further singles out both al-Sammān and Khalīfah as *avant-gardes*.

By recounting the narrative of these novels, I highlight the most important themes tackled in this trilogy which are the Palestinian national struggle and Palestinian women's double suffering under traditional social constraints and under the Israeli occupation. I argue that Khalīfah remains extraordinary in her portrayal of these two struggles and setting them as parallels. She represents simultaneously the pain Palestinians endure for the sake of liberating the land on one hand and for the sake of liberating their society from patriarchal conventional customs on the other. This is done through highlighting Palestinian women's resistance to long-established restrictions in their traditional society while narrating stories of national resistance against the enemy. Both forms of resistance abound with pain which becomes inseparable from the Palestinian reality. Khalīfah's representation of pain is unusual in the sense that she emphasises the humanity of both conflicting sides: the Palestinians and the Israelis. Therefore, Khalīfah adds to the resistance novel a new dimension which has not yet been tackled by other contemporary Palestinian women writers. Finally, I provide in this chapter the necessary material with which to examine the critical realist trends that Khalīfah implements in representing feminist and nationalist struggle in occupied Palestine, which will be the topic of the next chapter of this study.





## CHAPTER SEVEN

### CRITICAL REALISM IN KHALĪFAH'S TRILOGY

In this chapter, I examine the application of critical realism in Saḥar Khalīfah's trilogy. I base my argument on the close analysis of her trilogy that I provided in the previous chapter. In the first section of this chapter I will provide a general overview of realism: the variety of its scope and practice, and trace the rise of realism within the context of Arabic literature. In the second section I examine *critical* realism through its application by Khalīfah in her trilogy. This will be elucidated by examples from the three novels under study.

In the context of this chapter, I consider Khalīfah's innovative implementation of *critical realism* as a literary style pioneering in the sense that, to this day, there is no mention in the existing critical scholarship of any other contemporary Levantine woman writer who has deployed critical realism in her writings. Besides, although some critical studies acknowledge the realism of some of Khalīfah's novels, hardly any of them scrutinise this literary style in depth.

For instance, in his study of contemporary Arab women's writings, Joseph Zeidan states that: "[i]n the Palestinian society of the West Bank under Israeli occupation, Khalīfah finds a *real experience* with which to make her abstract ideas [of

her previous novels] *concrete*.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, Zeidan describes Khalīfah’s writings—in particular *Wild Thorns* and *Sunflower*—as realistic, yet his argument does not expand beyond this statement. It is also worth mentioning that Zeidan, in his study, does not describe the writings of any of the other women writers such as al-Sa‘dāwī, al-Zayyāt, Badr, al-Sammān, to name a few, as realistic.<sup>2</sup> In fact, Zeidan goes on to distinguish Khalīfah from other Palestinian women writers such as Hiyām Ramzī al-Durdunjī and Salwā al-Bannā whose lack of experience in the “world of men” resulted in their “artistic shortcomings”. Yet, Khalīfah remains an exception since her “life on the occupied West Bank gave her firsthand experience of the social and political pressures and conflicts”<sup>3</sup> which she compellingly reflects in her realistic novels. Like Zeidan, Muhammad Siddiq analyses in an article some of Khalīfah’s narrative and linguistic features. Although he acknowledges the realism of her fiction, he does not thoroughly examine the characteristics of this trend in Khalīfah’s novels.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, Khalīfah’s realism is seen as a result of her “familiarity with many of the roles played by her characters”.<sup>5</sup> This kind of familiarity which reflects spontaneously on the society and its inhabitants might be the reason behind the assumption that Khalīfah’s realism is associated with socialist realism. Scholars such as Mattityahu Peled and Hanan Mikhail-Ashrawi claim that Khalīfah is dedicated and

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<sup>1</sup> Zeidan (1995), p. 178. Emphasis is mine.

<sup>2</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 157-229. In the chapter entitled ‘The Quest for National Identity’, Zeidan examines the writings of a number of contemporary Arab women writers where the theme of national identity emerges in parallel to individual identity and in some cases, replaces the latter. He lists Khalīfah among the above-mentioned writers as examples of this trend.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 227.

<sup>4</sup> See Siddiq, ‘The Fiction of Sahar Khalifah’, pp. 148, 152.

<sup>5</sup> Aida A. Bamia, ‘Feminism in Revolution: the Case of Sahar Khalifa’, in *Tradition, Modernity, and Postmodernity in Arabic Literature: Essays in Honor of Professor Issa J. Boullata*, Kamal Abdel-Malek & Wael Hallaq (Eds.), (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp.173-185 (181).

committed to socialist realism since “the characters’ response to their reality and their rejection of its inadequacies are the active, propelling force which forms the basic motivation of the plot movement.”<sup>6</sup> Neither Peled nor Mikhail-Ashrawi supports this assumption by any relevant analysis and discussion to explain the elements of socialist realism that Khalīfah supposedly applies in her works.<sup>7</sup> Instead, Mikhail-Ashrawi rushes to general conclusions in asserting the ‘realism’ of Khalīfah’s *Sunflower* without specifying which kind of realism or revisiting her earlier assumption.<sup>8</sup> The argument presented in this chapter will provide a detailed analysis of the main characteristics of critical realism and its manifestation in Khalīfah’s novels under study, hence contradicting the above assumption that Khalīfah’s works can be seen as socialist realist novels.

Consequently, in this chapter I propose a new understanding of the feminist and nationalist trends of Khalīfah’s trilogy in the light of *critical realism*. The following argument will highlight Khalīfah’s deployment of certain literary characteristics of *critical realism* while reflecting concurrently on Palestinian feminist and nationalist struggles. This will be done through close reading of Moḥammed Sulaiman al-Goaifli’s *Contemporary Arabic Literary Criticism of Fiction: A Study of the Realist Trend*.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Mikhail-Ashrawi (1982), p. 264.

<sup>7</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 262-276. See also Mattityahu Peled, ‘Saḥar Khalīfah’s ‘*Abbād al-Shams*: A Feminist Challenge’, in *Writer, Culture, Text: Studies in Modern Arabic Literature*, Ami Elad (Ed.), (Fredericton: York Press Ltd: 1993), pp. 37-46 (37). It is worth mentioning that both Mikhail-Ashrawi and Peled seem to build their assumption on the illusion that Khalīfah herself is a socialist. However, Khalīfah states in 1988 that she is not a socialist. See Saḥar Khalīfeh, *Women of No Man’s Land*, PhD Diss., (Iowa: The University of Iowa, 1988), 53.

<sup>8</sup> Mikhail-Ashrawi states: “‘*Abbad al-Shams* stands as the most accomplished representative of the current movement of realism in Palestinian fiction and as a distinct landmark in the development of this movement.” See Mikhail-Ashrawi (1982), p. 276.

<sup>9</sup> In this chapter, I rely on al-Goaifli’s analysis and examination of literary realism, its history, and characteristics, mainly because he offers a detailed study of the realist trend in Arabic literature in the

## LITERARY REALISM: GENERAL OVERVIEW

In this section I provide a general overview of the realist trend in Arabic literature: its rise, the variety of its scope and practice, thematic concerns, and major characteristics. In this sense, the historical and literary material provided in this section forms an essential background to the following dissection of Khalīfah's trilogy in the light of literary critical realism.

While attempting to trace the rise and development of the realist trend in Arabic literature, one comes across general observation by critics such as Muḥammad Ḥasan 'Abd Allah and Ḥilmī Budayr who consider the *maqama* the first literary form in Arabic literature to objectively reflect social reality.<sup>10</sup> Despite the accuracy of this observation, it is necessary to provide the basic historical and literary development behind this observation. To begin with, it is helpful to shed light on the *maqama* which originated in the Abbasid period. "It is based on a single anecdote and features a hero, usually a wandering rogue, in a solitary role, as narrator or monologist. Simple and straightforward, the original purpose of the *maqama* was, generally, not only to amuse, but to instruct the Arabs in the subtleties and beauty of their language."<sup>11</sup> The *maqama* style of rhymed prose mixed with poetry stands as the first step towards adapting the

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historical period in which Khalīfah started writing. However, other studies are examined and referred to here, although as secondary references.

<sup>10</sup> See Muḥammad Ḥasan 'Abd Allah, *Al-Wāqī'īyah fī al-Riwāyah al-'Arabīyah (Realism in the Arabic Novel)*, (Al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Ma'ārif 1971), p. 120-1 and Ḥilmī Budayr, *Al-'Ittijāh al-Wāqī'ī fī al-Riwāyah al-'Arabīyah al-Ḥadīthah fī Misr (The Realist Trend in the Modern Egyptian Novel)*, (Al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Ma'ārif 1981), pp. 64-5. Translations of the titles and quotations from Arabic sources are mine, unless otherwise mentioned. From now on, I will refer to these works with their English titles.

<sup>11</sup> Moosa (1997), p. xi.

novel and the short story as new genres while preserving the rhetorical extravagance of classical Arabic.<sup>12</sup>

On the one hand, Muḥammad al-Muwayliḥ's *Ḥadīth 'Isā Ibn Hishām* (*The Story of 'Isa ibn-Hishām*; 1907) is considered among the first to criticise the social realities of Egyptian society during al-Muwayliḥ's lifetime using the style of the *maqama*. In this work, the author concentrates on reflecting social reality without investing much time or effort on the literary aspects of his work.<sup>13</sup> At the time of such early attempts towards realism, fiction was not recognised yet as a respectable form of art.<sup>14</sup> Towards the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, contact with the West helped in introducing the novel and the short story as new literary genres through translations and adaptations from Western literature. These new genres were favoured by some Egyptian writers, such as Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm and Maḥmūd Ṭāhir Lāshīn, who formed a literary group called 'The New School' in Egypt in the 1920s to encourage fiction writing.<sup>15</sup>

However, during the 1940s and 1950s there was a strong demand for realistic fiction to be adopted as a serious literary genre and to recognise its merits "especially in reflecting current social life and containing direct adaptations of the views of such western [*sic*] realists as Balzac and Zola."<sup>16</sup> Yet it was not until the early fifties when

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<sup>12</sup> Budayr (1981), pp. 64-5.

<sup>13</sup> 'Abd Allah (1971), pp. 123-4.

<sup>14</sup> See Moḥammed Sulaiman al-Goaifli, *Contemporary Arabic Literary Criticism of Fiction: A Study of the Realist Trend*, PhD Diss., (Michigan: The University of Michigan Microfilms international, 1987), pp. 1-3.

<sup>15</sup> Moosa (1997), pp. 280-1. It is worth mentioning that Lāshīn is considered by Moosa one of the earliest Egyptian writers to transform Egyptian fiction from romanticism to realism which later culminated in the works of Naguib Maḥfouz.

<sup>16</sup> Al-Goaifli (1987), p. 3.

Arabic fiction grew more popular in the literary field that it became the subject of Arabic literary criticism.

Against this general introductory overview, it is worth mentioning that the rise of the Arabic novel as a literary genre in the mid-twentieth century coincided with the rise of realism over other literary movements.<sup>17</sup> This phenomenon replicates the rise of realism and the novel in England towards the mid-nineteenth century and its dominance over other literary forms. George Becker highlights the correlation between realism and the genre of the novel in his statement: “Prose fiction has been the major vehicle of realism; the important and searching critical discussions have revolved around it almost exclusively.”<sup>18</sup> Likewise, the popularity of Arabic fiction facilitated the adoption of realism in Arabic literature.

It was in the period following the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars that the English novel “came to seem, on the basis of its critical function, for the first time a completely respectable literary form.”<sup>19</sup> In broad terms, realism began as a reaction against romanticism. Becker acknowledges that “at the point where modern realism began, romanticism was the enemy, something against which young writers could unite . . . the prevailing mode was thin and lifeless because it had lost touch with ordinary, everyday life.”<sup>20</sup> On the English front, during the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars (1789–1815), English society witnessed the gradual departure from the aristocratic romanticism and its associated ‘loose morality’. The political pressure of

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<sup>17</sup> Al-Goaifli (1987), p. 12.

<sup>18</sup> George J. Becker (Ed.), *Documents of Modern Literary Realism*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967; 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1963), pp. vi-vii.

<sup>19</sup> Ioan Williams, *The Realist Novel in England: A Study in Development*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1975), p. 6.

<sup>20</sup> Becker (1967), p. 5.

that time required more emphasis on morality. In literature, this was manifested in an attack on “Romantic literature and on subjectivism and sentimentalism in general.”<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, in England, despite the literary development, the novel remained to a certain extent controlled by a conservatism which reinforced the development of the English novel in a different way from the development of the French and German novel.<sup>22</sup> For instance, owing to her conservative fiction, “Jane Austen might almost be said to have provided the basic format for the later Realist novel.”<sup>23</sup> Therefore, the political situation in Europe affected the development of the English novel as a literary genre; this was accompanied by the emergence of the first seeds of realism.<sup>24</sup> Despite the direct effect of these political conditions, such literary changes can be justified by the writers’ wish “to do more than confirm already established ideas and [to look] for a new form to express the experience of man. Similarly, writers’ appropriate themes [are] now recognized as realist portrayal of common men and their everyday lives.”<sup>25</sup> This literary attitude can be applied to writers in England, the Arab world and perhaps other parts of the world.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the realisation of the need for a new literary form to reflect

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<sup>21</sup> Williams (1975), p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> Becker acknowledges that “there was a strong indigenous tendency toward realism among English writers in the last half of the nineteenth century, only . . . it was a narrow, sectarian realism, always watched over by the clergy.” Becker (1967), p. 15. Becker goes on to emphasise that such conservatism resulted in the lack of “English realistic works as imposing as those of French, Russian, or American writers.” Becker (1967), p. 16.

<sup>23</sup> See Williams (1975), p. 10. Williams states that Austen’s *Emma* presents “individual and social experience within a sharply realised social and geographical contest.”

<sup>24</sup> According to Becker, the beginning of realism has not been asserted specifically. However, the term ‘realism’ appeared in England and France in the decade of the 1850’s. It has occurred in association with names such as Balzac, the painter Courbet, Edmond Duranty, Champfleury. See Becker (1967), p. 7.

<sup>25</sup> Al-Goaifli (1987), p. 13.

<sup>26</sup> See al-Ṭāhir al-Hammāmī, *M’-al-Wāqi’iyah fī-al-’Adab wa-l-Fan (Realism in Literature and Art)*, (Tūnis: Dār al-Nashr lil-Maghrib al-’Arabī, 1984), p. 58, where he considers the rise of the novel and realism to happen together in all literatures.



real life in literature can be considered one of the main urges behind the emergence of realism.

The rise of realism in modern Arabic literature might be influenced, to a certain extent, by factors similar to those that affected the English novel. First of all, it is worth mentioning that realism in Arabic literature is considered to be influenced a great deal by Western realism. Secondly, Arabic literature witnessed a similar departure to that of English literature from romanticism in the period following World War II. Yet Arab realists expressed more interest in social and national aspects in their realist portrayal of their surroundings. This is due to their enthusiastic desires to improve their social and political reality, and to rebel against the obstacles which impede its amelioration.<sup>27</sup>

In the case of contemporary Palestinian literature, the Arab defeat of 1967 marked the indigenous emergence of Palestinian fiction. In the period between World War I and 1967, Palestinian fiction “exhibited a distinct lack in form and content of the basic requirements of the genre.”<sup>28</sup> Therefore, the oversimplified and fragmented, poetic and heroic style was replaced in the post-1967 period by “a more realistic, mature, and perceptive examination of and interaction with a reality as a complex and dynamic process which requires a more complex and dynamic perception and literary forms of expression.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, the socio-political reality of Palestinians in the post-1967 period helped to establish the novel as a serious genre and marked the emergence of realism in Palestinian fiction.

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<sup>27</sup> For more information about the Western impinge on Arabic realism see ‘Abbās Khidr, *Al-Wāqi‘īyah fī al-Adab (Realism in Literature)*, (Baghdād: Wizārat al-Thaqāfah, 1967), pp. 16, 21, 25.

<sup>28</sup> Mikhail-Ashrawi (1982), p. 200.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 201.

Hence, “intellectualism, political and social circumstances, and foreign influences”<sup>30</sup> can be regarded as the potential factors which affected the rise of realism in the Arabic novel. In his analysis of these three categories, al-Goaifli pays more attention to political and social conditions as exerting the major influence on the rise of realism. He extends this category to examine in more detail “women’s social status” and “social classes” and their effects on the Arabic novel. This study highlights the connection between the political and social history of Arab countries, especially the Mashriq, that might have influenced largely the realist trend in Arabic literature. This political and social overview will help to examine the realist trend in Khalīfah’s trilogy under study; it provides the necessary background against which feminist and nationalist issues have been expressed realistically.

To start with, al-Goaifli highlights the influence of the 1798 French invasion of Egypt on the intellectual movement in the Arab world during that period which subsequently marked “the beginning of modern Arabic history”.<sup>31</sup> This new contact with the West urged Arab thinkers and reformers, particularly Egyptians, to improve their nations’ social, political, and intellectual realities to reach similar standards to those of their Western colonisers.<sup>32</sup> Yet the three-year French occupation of Egypt was not enough to improve deeply the Egyptian culture and literature. The true literary revival in Egypt took place during the reign of Muḥammad ‘Alī (1805-1848), mainly

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<sup>30</sup> Al-Goaifli (1987), p. 16.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>32</sup> See Moosa (1997), p. 3.

through the “schools he established and [most importantly] the educational missions he sent to Europe in the first quarter of the nineteenth century.”<sup>33</sup>

Different generations of Arab critics and scholars proposed different arguments and demands regarding cultural innovation. The works of the first generation of Arab thinkers—namely, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Jabartī, Rifā‘ah al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, ‘Alī Mubārak, and Khayr al-Dīn al-Tūnisī—reflected some aspects of Western civilisation and were, therefore, seen as imitative of Western literature and culture with the hope of employing some of these features towards the amelioration of Arab societies.<sup>34</sup> The later generation of intellectuals exemplified by Jamāl al-Dīn al-‘Afghānī and Muḥammad ‘Abduh insisted that improving the reality of Arab nations lies in the capacity of Muslims to discover unity and to adhere to their religious principles. Other critics suggested promoting modern scientific theories or socialism as a means of improving Arab reality.

Therefore, Arab thinkers aimed at moving their culture forward by enhancing social, political, economic, and intellectual conditions in their homelands. Their suggested trajectories, however, varied from one generation to another.<sup>35</sup> Although this approach by Arab intellectuals generated the first spark of realism in Arabic literature, it has been observed that the seeds of realism can be detected “in the reformist writings

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>34</sup> See Sabry Hafez, *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse: a Study in the Sociology of Modern Arabic Literature*, (London: Saqi Books, 1993), p. 17. It is worth mentioning that in a more recent study Kamran Rastegar argues against this assumption of imitating the West and the “occidental exportation of modernity” and states that the writings of al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, for instance—especially *Takhliṣ al-Ibriz fi Talkhis Baris*—were merely a “reportage mode of travel writing” (travelogues) that reflected his vision of Western countries that he visited and not an imitation of Western cultures and literatures. See Kamran Rastegar, *Literary Modernity between the Middle East and Europe: Textual Transactions in Nineteenth-Century Arabic, English, and Persian Literatures*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 22-26, 80-83, 85.

<sup>35</sup> Al-Goaifli (1987), p. 18.

that preceded the emergence of the realist novel,”<sup>36</sup> around the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth,<sup>37</sup> as will subsequently be explained.

Another factor that nurtured the emergence of realism is the newly recognised importance of fiction and its role in social reform among some of the above-mentioned thinkers such as al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, al-Shidyāq, al-ʿAfghānī, and ʿAbduh. Under the influence of Western culture and literature, mainly British and French, these intellectuals reflected a number of its literary influences in their writings.<sup>38</sup> Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī was one of the prominent figures in Muḥammad ʿAlī’s missions to Europe. He observed the French culture, politics, and literature which he mirrored in his writings and translations. Hence, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī “may be considered the first modern Arab writer to have used fiction (although in translation) to criticize actual political conduct, a common objective of the *realist* movement.”<sup>39</sup> His works were regarded as marking the first departure in Arabic literature from traditional to more modernised models,<sup>40</sup> that is, more realist forms.

These works in translation were studied by critics such as al-ʿAfghānī and ʿAbduh whose reformist ideas and admiration of fiction and its role in reforming society had special influence on other writers. This led to the production of the “first realist long fiction in modern Arabic literature,”<sup>41</sup> namely al-Muwaylīḥī’s *The Story of ʿĪsa ibn-Hishām* (1907) and Ḥafīz Ibrāhīm’s *Layālī Satīḥ* (*Satīḥ’s Nights*; 1906). Although

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>37</sup> See Le Gassick (1979), pp. 20-33, 38-45.

<sup>38</sup> For more information about the impact of Western culture and literature on these intellectuals, see Ibid., pp. 7-15, 23-33.

<sup>39</sup> Al-Goaifli (1987), p. 19. Emphasis is mine.

<sup>40</sup> See Moosa (1997), pp. 5-6.

<sup>41</sup> Al-Goaifli (1987), p. 21. The date of the publication of al-Muwaylīḥī’s *The Story of ʿĪsa ibn-Hishām* is stated by al-Goaifli as 1905. Although this work had been first published as a series of articles in *Miṣbāḥ al-Sharq* newspaper, these articles were collected and put together into book form which appeared in 1907. See Allen, ‘The Beginnings’, pp. 180-192 (185). I choose to follow Allen’s date as stated above in p. 4.

al-Muwayliḥī's and Ibrāhīm's works have been claimed to reflect the influence of al-'Afghānī's and 'Abduh's perseverance on implementing some features of Western cultures as means of reforming Arab societies,<sup>42</sup> their writings can be seen in the light of a more recent study as merely criticising their Egyptian society on the basis of their observations of other Western countries through travel and exile. In the case of al-Muwayliḥī, for instance, Kamran Rastegar acknowledges that "the experience of travel and exile was constitutional to the literary imagination"<sup>43</sup> of al-Muwayliḥī. Yet, and despite al-Muwayliḥī's appreciation of classical Arabic literature, the *maqama* in particular, he "rather than record [his] social and cultural critiques through the convention of an autobiographical travelogue, [he] chose to utilize a literary imagination involving fictive, even fantastic, elements"<sup>44</sup> in his text. Therefore, *ʿĪsa ibn-Hishām* can be seen to form a step ahead of the style of travelogue—as in al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's *Takhlis*—by means of social criticism conveyed in a modified form of the traditional rhymed prose of the *maqama*.<sup>45</sup>

Consequently, the reformers paved the way for realism and drew attention to the novel as a successful device for realism. Al-Goaifli emphasises that critics'

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<sup>42</sup> See 'Abd al-Muḥsin T. Badr, *Ṭaṭāwwur al-Riwāyah al-'Arabīyah al-Ḥadīthah fī Misr (1870 – 1938) (The Development of Modern Arabic Novel in Egypt 1870-1938)*, (Al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Ma'ārif 1963), pp. 67-68, 77-78.

<sup>43</sup> Rastegar (2007), p. 96.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 96. Despite the importance of Rastegar's argument on the concepts of modernity and tradition in Arabic literature of the late nineteenth century to which these works belong, it is not my intention here to delve into these details. Rather I employ this literary history to evince the rise of realism, as a literary aesthetic style, in Arabic literature of the twentieth century.

<sup>45</sup> See Moosa (1997), pp. 129, 139, 146-7. Moosa observes that al-Muwayliḥī chose the rigid form of the traditional *maqama* to convey his liberal ideas in an attempt to satisfy the Muslim conservative audience while providing the modernists with a challenging material. Moosa also considers Ibrāhīm in *Satih's Nights* to be influenced by al-Muwayliḥī. Yet both writers' reproduction of the *maqama* remains experimental.

acceptance of fiction as an instrument for social reform is significant because prior to the 1930s, fiction was generally considered as a low form of literature practiced only by ungifted writers and suitable only for folk tales. Acceptance of fiction among Arab intellectuals may have encouraged some writers to use fiction as a medium for expressing themselves and their social views.<sup>46</sup>

Thus Egyptian reformers played a significant role in the adaptation of some aspects of Western literature in Arabic fiction during the 1950s. This marks the beginning of realism in Arabic literature and the importance of fiction as a device of social reform.

- **MODES OF LITERARY REALISM**

On the whole, literary realism can be further divided into two major categories: critical realism and socialist realism.<sup>47</sup> Critical realism is the dominant trend of nineteenth-century literature in most of Europe. It was created in reaction to the changing political and social realities in European society during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Accordingly, critical realism's main concern at that time was to mimic the negative sides of reality artistically.<sup>48</sup> Becker reminds us: "Critical realism is to be found . . . in fact everywhere that there has been an effort to depict the workings of bourgeois society and to show its ugly and repressive aspects."<sup>49</sup> In his study of critical realism versus 'decadent bourgeois modernism', Lukács asserts that "Modernist literature glorifies, with sophisticated artistry, phenomena which must otherwise appear nightmarish to the intellectual who has no perspective of the future. While traditional critical realism transforms the positive and negative elements of bourgeois life into 'typical' situations and reveals them for what they are, modernism exalts bourgeois

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<sup>46</sup> Al-Goaifli (1987), p. 24.

<sup>47</sup> Al-Hammāmī (1984), p. 57. See also Lukács (1979), pp. 93-135.

<sup>48</sup> Budayr (1981), pp. 22, 149.

<sup>49</sup> Becker (1967), p. 21.

life's very baseness and emptiness with its aesthetic devices.”<sup>50</sup> This kind of reflection, however, is considered static; it does not express any dynamism in conveying the development of the changes which are taking place. In other terms, since critical realism is the product of the bourgeoisie, it produces a one-sided literary form which criticises the society generally without asserting a particular concept; as if it does not dare to do more than criticising the system of which it arose.<sup>51</sup> Hence, the rise of Marxism and socialism provided literary realism with the necessary dynamism to accompany the changes of societies. Therefore, socialist realism came into existence as a literary form which reflects reality in its revolutionary development, especially the development of class struggle.<sup>52</sup>

Arabic literature is no exception of this general rule as the following discussion will demonstrate. In the context of the pragmatic and direct political effects on this literary movement in Arabic culture, there are two forms in which politics affected the development of realism in Arabic literature: “political events and political parties.”<sup>53</sup> The major political events that had influenced the rise and development of realism are colonisation, the struggle for independence, revolutionary movements and the creation of Israel. Arab critics' reaction to and understanding of these political factors were expressed in one of the two major realist forms: ‘critical realism’ or ‘socialist realism.’

According to al-Goaifli, critical realism implies that “political events directed the attention of writers to real life in their own societies, thus inspiring them to write

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<sup>50</sup> Lukács (1979), p. 68.

<sup>51</sup> See al-Hammāmī (1984), p. 58.

<sup>52</sup> For more information about and a general distinction between the major two forms of realism see *ibid.*, pp. 57-60. See also Becker (1967), pp. 21-22.

<sup>53</sup> Al-Goaifli (1987), p. 24.

about it.”<sup>54</sup> This is demonstrated in, first of all, the gradual departure from romanticism in literature and the increasing interest in realism. Secondly, the deviation from literary trends such as existentialism and the “anguish of the absurd [which] soon revealed to many its limitations in responding to the urgent social and political demands of the contemporary Arab world.”<sup>55</sup> Such limitations imposed on intellectuals the necessity to transpose ‘individualism’, manifested in existentialism, into a more practical literary trend that better represents the fierce reality while offering some kinds of resolution; that is, by adopting a realism which is both critical and socialist in nature.<sup>56</sup>

Moreover, these political events arouse ‘national consciousness’, that is, a general awareness and political self-awakening on the part of different communities in the Arab world. This consciousness urged writers to observe their own realities and describe it in a way that encompasses the various aspects that shape their societies.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, this consciousness has “spurred on the necessity of reform to the extent that the call for reform has surpassed other demands.”<sup>58</sup> Thus, political events entailed the creation of realistic trends in Arabic literature which in turn necessitated general social reform.

On the local front, political events aroused the individual conscience and consciousness of writers in addition to the broader societal development of nationalist consciousness. For example, the association of the 1919 Egyptian uprising with the

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>55</sup> Harlow (1987), p. 165.

<sup>56</sup> See Peter Nazareth, ‘An Interview with Sahar Khalifeh’, *The Iowa Review*, Vol. 11, Issue 1 (1981), pp. 67-86 (71). Although in this interview, Khalīfah refers to Marxism, she widens her argument later in the interview to include both trends of realism.

<sup>57</sup> Rashīdah Muhrān, *Al-Wāqī‘īyah wa-Ittijāhātuhā fī al-Shi‘ir al-‘Arabī al-Mu‘āṣir (Realism and its Trends in Contemporary Arabic Poetry)*, (Al-Iskandariyyah: al-Hay’ah al-‘Āmmah lil-Kitāb, 1979), p. 71.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 57.



emergence of the Egyptian character in fiction and the publication of the first Iraqi realist novel in 1921 as a result of the 1920 Iraqi uprising against colonialism.<sup>59</sup> The Iraqi example reveals the effect of colonialism on the development of realism. This has led some critics, such as ‘Umar al-Ṭālib, to conclude that colonial expansion necessitated a radical change in the literary and intellectual domain of Arab societies. Subsequently, the realist trend came into existence in Iraq as a corollary of colonialism. It was marked by a strong reaction against romanticism and a realisation of the essential need to examine and reflect reality objectively and honestly as a means of moving the society forward beyond the negative effects of colonialism.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, the combination and coalescence of heightened Arab and local consciousnesses stimulated by contemporary political events, played a major role in the emergence of realism in Arabic literature.

The case of Palestine, which could be said to fall under the category of local consciousness, remains exceptional. The harsh realities imposed on the Palestinian people from the times of the British mandate through the creation of the state of Israel until the present day, entail a distinctive set of aesthetic pressures on writers, necessitating different kinds of literary exploration and innovation within realist genres. Palestinian writers assumed the responsibility of reflecting their people’s reality as means of seeking a solution out of the Palestinian crisis.<sup>61</sup> Mikhail-Ashrawi emphasises that in Palestinian literature in general, a “unifying element . . . continues to be the

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<sup>59</sup> See ‘Umar al-Ṭālib, *Al-Fann al-Qaṣaṣī fī al-‘Adab al-‘Irāqī al-Ḥadīth: al-Riwāyah al-‘Arabīyah fī al-‘Irāq (The Art of Narrative in Modern Iraqi Literature: The Arabic Novel in Iraq)*, Vol. 1, (Baghdād: Maktabat al-‘Andalus, 1971), pp. 33-5.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 234-5.

<sup>61</sup> See Abū Maṭar (1980), pp. 200-1.

objective reality of the Palestinian experience not only as the concrete background and setting but also as an essential part of the conflict, a motivating force, and a dominant theme.”<sup>62</sup> Thus, the aesthetic and political particularities of realism in Palestinian resistance literature arise out of the particular severity of Palestinian oppression and suffering.

Contemporary socialist realism is regarded as “the basic method of Soviet belles-lettres and literary criticism, [it demands] of the writer truthful representation of reality in its revolutionary development.”<sup>63</sup> This ‘revolutionary’ aspect of socialist realism is viewed by Budayr as a reaction against capitalism and its negative consequences on society. Hence, socialist realism aims at revealing the defects of capitalism which makes its discourse limited to economic materialist values.<sup>64</sup> This concept of socialist realism has been applied to some Arabic literature and literary criticism.<sup>65</sup> In this sense, socialist realism has a different view regarding the impact of political events on the rise of realism in Arabic literature: “Socialist realism asserts that literature is a part of political realism (i.e., socialism), part of the political activities themselves.”<sup>66</sup> Therefore, socialist realists believe that literature, in particular the novel and the short story, can be utilised to serve political reform.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Mikhail-Ashrawi (1982), p. 204.

<sup>63</sup> A. N. Staif, ‘The Soviet Impact on Modern Arabic Literary Criticism: Husayn Muruwwa’s Concept of the “New Realism”’, *Bulletin (British Society for Middle Eastern Studies)*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (1984), pp. 156-171 (160). Staif acquaints the reader of the development of the concept of socialist realism over the years. The definition referred to here, is the most recent concept of socialist realism.

<sup>64</sup> Budayr (1981), p. 28.

<sup>65</sup> See Staif, ‘The Soviet Impact’, pp. 162-3.

<sup>66</sup> Al-Goaifli (1987), p. 28.

<sup>67</sup> ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Shāwī, *Sulṭat al-Wāqi‘īyah: Maqālāt Taṭbiqiyyah fī al-Riwāyah wa al-Qiṣṣah (The Authority of Realism: Applied Articles about The Novel and the Story)*, (Dimashq, Ittihad al-Kutub al-‘Arab, 1981), p. 12.

In his study of Moroccan literature and nationalism, ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Shāwī highlights the inseparable relationship between realism and nationalism: “Nationalism was a political action in opposition to direct colonialism . . . Literary realism, as part of the culture and literature . . . was part of this opposition.”<sup>68</sup> Al-Goaifli does not agree with al-Shāwī’s argument and states that “realism did not mature in every Arab country until the end of ‘direct colonialism’ in each country. . . . According to al-Shāwī’s theory, realism should have vanished with the activity of which it was a part (i.e., the struggle against the direct colonialist presence).”<sup>69</sup> Thus the socialist realists’ suggestion that realism is connected directly to nationalism is questionable; especially that “the appearance of socialist realism directly followed the formation of socialist political parties in the Arab world.”<sup>70</sup> This was the result of the adoption of socialist-Marxist ideology by some Arab intellectuals in the early fifties.<sup>71</sup>

Another factor that might have influenced the emergence of realism in modern Arabic literature is the social status of Arab women. As early as the late nineteenth century, al-Ṭahṭāwī—and later Qāsim Amīn—called for Arab women’s education and emancipation, as mentioned above in Chapter One. Since World War II, the status of most urban Arab women has been improved as corollary of the general economic, social and political improvement in Arab societies.<sup>72</sup> During that specific post-World War II period, both the form and content of the Arab realist novel were changing. Al-Goaifli addresses the question “whether women’s social status was related to the development

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>69</sup> Al-Goaifli (1987), pp. 29-30.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>71</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 32-3. See also Staif, ‘The Soviet Impact’, pp. 157, 164-7 where he examined Ḥusayn Murūwwa’s adaptation of Soviet realism to Arabic literature.

<sup>72</sup> Al-Ṭālib (1971), p. 233.

of realist fiction, or whether the reforms were mere coincidence.”<sup>73</sup> This question was addressed earlier in the late 1920s and early 1930s when Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal suggested that Egyptian women’s backward social status at that time was a direct factor in holding back the development of the novel.<sup>74</sup> Al-Goaifli points out that Haykal “did not want women to have the social freedom of open love in order for him to observe and realistically portray it, but rather to have women’s open love become acceptable to society so society would in turn accept the fictional portrayal of such love (whether real or imaginary), and thus accept the novel as an art form.”<sup>75</sup> Thus, Arab women’s limited freedom affects the developments within the realist Arabic novel. It is unlikely that the form will be accepted within society if it explores and dramatises ideas, issues, and concerns which are pertinent to women—socially, politically, and emotionally—as long as women’s freedom is not accepted as a basic right within society.

However, al-Goaifli proposes a different argument in which he emphasises that Arab women’s freedom to love openly does not have much to do with the improvement of the realist novel: “realists are not much concerned with love issues [i.e. romantic love]. For realists, women have much more to do in society than simply to love or to be the objects of love.”<sup>76</sup> He refers to ‘Ādil Kāmil’s and Maḥfūz’s works as examples of the ‘truly realist novels’ of the 1940s which did not focus on romantic love as the dominant theme.<sup>77</sup> ‘Abd Allah underlines the interrelationship between women’s social status—in particular, women’s freedom regarding marriage and work—and the realist

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<sup>73</sup> Al-Goaifli (1987), p. 35.

<sup>74</sup> Budayr (1981), p. 130.

<sup>75</sup> Al-Goaifli (1987), p. 37.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>77</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 38.

novel; he argues that these social aspects of women's lives are part of reality and reflecting them in literature strengthens the realism of a literary work.<sup>78</sup>

'Abd Allah's argument highlights the role of Arab women's social status in the development of the novel in general, and in the realist novel in particular. For realist writers to portray a society in as realistic a way as possible, they will need to portray women as integral members of that society. Intrinsic social and cultural restraints ingrained within society prevent Arab male writers from direct exposure to and experience of women's lives. Thus male writers' portrayal of women is arguably largely a work of imagination.<sup>79</sup> Yet female writers, such as Khalīfah, are of course unencumbered by such cultural obstacles. Hence I would like to argue that Arab women's reflections on their societies can be seen from the outset as more realistic than those of male writers, even though they too are obviously fictional creations.

When Khalīfah started writing in the 1970s, there were less social constraints on Palestinian women than in the 1940s. Khalīfah's ability to portray realistically Palestinian women's status, activity, and social and political roles stems from her accessibility to women's lives in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Beside the casual access to women's lives, Khalīfah is exposed directly to specific realities through the Women's Affairs Centre which she founded in Nablus. This enables her to reflect more realistically some of the facts related to Palestinian women's lives in her fiction. This 'privilege' has not been and still is not available to other Arab writers who have argued that "Arab novelists cannot portray women's general role in society because a woman does not have sufficient social freedom to allow the writer to observe her real role and

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<sup>78</sup> 'Abd Allah (1971), pp. 106-7.

<sup>79</sup> See al-Goaifli (1987), p. 39.

to give a realist [*sic*] portrayal of it.”<sup>80</sup> Though this view is presented mainly by male critics, this can be also applied to Arab women writers whose social class prevents them from mingling with women from other social classes; their realistic presentation of women’s social roles is therefore limited to their own class.<sup>81</sup>

This leads to the second social factor that affects the rise and development of realism in Arabic literature: the formation and stratification of social class in Arab societies and the changes they have undergone during the twentieth century. The Arab social class structure, especially in areas such as Egypt, Syria and Iraq, has been changing since the early twentieth century due to a continuously increasing population and the consequential migration to urban areas, and the improvement of education.<sup>82</sup> The new social structure in Arab society can be classified as: a traditional upper class (ruling elites, feudal families in the rural areas and big-city merchants), a middle class (small city merchants and newly-educated people), and a lower class (migrants from rural areas to new urban factories and urban workers).<sup>83</sup>

Al-Goaifli argues that these three dominant social classes influenced the emergence of realism:

First, the upper class did not help to develop realism; in fact, it encouraged romanticism and escape [*sic*] literature rather than draw any attention to the existing reality from which it benefited most. Second, the realist novel emerged among writers of the middle class. Third, the

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>81</sup> Any of the women writers who belong to the first and second generations can be seen as an example of this category. See the first chapter where an argument about women writers’ social class is presented.

<sup>82</sup> Al-Ṭālib (1971), pp. 228-9.

<sup>83</sup> See al-Goaifli (1987), p. 45.

social problems and ambitions of the middle or lower class were those powerful enough to be reflected in the realist novel.<sup>84</sup>

Becker asserts that most realists come from the middle class and it was only natural for them to exploit in their writings material related to their class which was considered at the time 'of novelty'. He also highlights the early "tendency to go downward in the social scale . . . Realism seems to contain a kind of implicit Benthamite assumption that the life lived by the greatest number is somehow the most real."<sup>85</sup>

These arguments suggest that the widening gap among these social classes encouraged writers from the middle class to reflect newly arising social problems in their literature.<sup>86</sup> This is the result of either middle class envy of the upper class and their ambition to reach a higher status in the social ladder, or from middle-class writers' sympathy with the increased social problems of the lower classes.<sup>87</sup>

In both arguments, the widening gap between the classes plays a substantial role in fostering the rise of realism in the works of Arab writers in the first half of the twentieth century. The troubled political situation in the Arab world generally and the Mashriq in particular, did not achieve much in bringing these three social classes any closer to one another. On the contrary, the increased political turbulence intensified the economic pressures on the lower class in particular, widening the gap between the three

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 46. It is worth mentioning that the middle class role in the rise of the realist novel is also manifested in the fact that this middle class formed the larger part of the reading audience for which this kind of realistic literature is mainly produced. Hence, the writers had, and still have, the urge to satisfy the majority of their reading audience, that is, the middle class, by producing literature which meets the audience's satisfaction. See al-Ṭālib (1971), pp. 35-6.

<sup>85</sup> Becker (1967), p. 25.

<sup>86</sup> For more information on the affect of the rise of middle class on the emergence of realism in literature, see Raymond Williams, 'Realism and the Contemporary Novel', in *20th Century Literary Criticism: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge (London: Longman, 1981; 1st ed. 1972), pp. 581-2. See also Badr <sup>(1963)</sup> pp. 190-192.

<sup>87</sup> Al-Ṭālib (1971), pp. 227-29.

main classes even more. Thus political and social conditions are interconnected and produce the desire of writers from the middle class to represent increasing social problems through realist styles and genres.<sup>88</sup>

This social-political connection can be related to the previous alliance that was formed in the pre-World War II period between the feudalists and the colonialists on one side and between the middle and lower classes on the other. This latter alliance “produced a political movement that led to the emergence of some writers who expressed through their novels the sufferings and ambitions of the middle and lower classes.”<sup>89</sup> Therefore, the rise of realism in the Arabic novel has been affected largely by social factors such as women’s status and class structure in Arab societies.

One final factor that affects the rise and development of realism in literature is the influence exerted by Western realism through translation. It has been observed that “serious translation of Western realist novels [into Arabic] coincided with the production of original Arabic realist novels.”<sup>90</sup> While the translation of Western fiction into Arabic in the pre-World War II period affected the maturity of the novel as a “literary genre”, translation did not play a major role in the development of realism in Arabic literature during that period. This is due to the fact that these translations were mainly of “detective and mystery stories” and aimed at a relatively unsophisticated audience.<sup>91</sup> Yet direct exposure by early Arab realists such as ‘Īsa ‘Ubayd, Yaḥya Ḥaqqī, Maḥmūd Taymūr, Aḥmad al-Sayyid, Dhū al-Nūn ‘Ayyūb, Shakīb al-Jābirī, and

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<sup>88</sup> See al-Goaifli (1987), pp. 44-52.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 54. See also Badr (1963), p. 401.

<sup>91</sup> See Moosa (1997), p. 105. See also Badr (1963), p. 128.



Muḥammad Haykal, helped to introduce the realist novel into Arabic literature.<sup>92</sup> This has been achieved by three means: “direct reading, discussions, and first-hand experience with Western culture and literature from writers who had traveled to the West.”<sup>93</sup>

The influence of Western realism, though important, is only one among other factors that shaped the realism of the Arabic novel. Social and political events or parties can be considered of more importance in helping to sustain the themes and concerns that have occupied literary realist writers since post-World War II period. Thus social and political factors can be seen to be of equal importance in regard to their influence on the rise and development of Arabic realism. A further consequence of these factors is the subdivision of realism into two major trends: critical and socialist realism. The following sections will illustrate both trends with particular reference to critical realism and its implementation in Khalīfah’s fiction.

Therefore, this section illustrates that historically, the Arabic novel emerged in the late nineteenth century when a number of pioneer novelists, such as Muḥammad al-Muwaylīḥī and Ḥāfiẓ Ibrāhīm, decided to transform the function of Arabic stories and legends from amusement and entertainment into an art form that depicts, criticises, and suggests reformation of social problems, as discussed above.<sup>94</sup> This new form began to attract the attention of more writers and to be accepted by Arab critics in the period after World War II. Hence, the realist school came into existence, with the role of the novel

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<sup>92</sup> Al-Goaifli (1987), p. 54.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>94</sup> See Ibid., p. 63. It is worth mentioning that similar development had undergone the English novel in the late the eighteenth century by Fielding and Richardson, when the novel’s characteristic features “were its popularity as a form of entertainment and its inferiority as a form of art.” See Williams (1975), pp. 3-6.

being of extreme importance.<sup>95</sup> In this regard, realist criticism of the Arabic novel can be subdivided into ‘critical realism and socialist realism’. Although “[b]oth trends of thinking advocate the depiction of social reality as a means of improving it [the major distinction between these two trends is that among] the critical realists, there is no single idea associated with improvement of social reality. For the socialist realists, the concept specifically implies the creation of a socialist society.”<sup>96</sup> According to this conceptualisation of the two trends of realism, I will attempt to study Khalīfah’s trilogy in the light of critical realism. The following argument will shed light on ‘critical realism’, its history and literary characteristics. This will help to demonstrate the fact that Khalīfah in her fiction does not call for a socialist society as a solution to the catastrophes inflicted on a Palestinian society under occupation. Her depiction of social conflicts aims at raising people’s awareness of such conflicts in order to discover a variety of possible solutions.

### **CRITICAL REALIST FEATURES OF KHALĪFAH’S TRILOGY**

Critical realism originated in the Arab world from the combination of two trends in the period prior to World War II. The first trend is “reportage realism”<sup>97</sup> which aimed at producing what is called “local or public literature” by reflecting social practices,

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<sup>95</sup> See al-Goaifli (1987), pp. 63-4.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>97</sup> For more information on reportage in realism, its association with and development from journalism, see George J. Becker, *Realism in Modern Literature*, (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1980), pp. 116-7.

problems, and traditions.<sup>98</sup> The second trend is exemplified by the tendency of some Arab writers to use fiction as a didactic medium.<sup>99</sup> The combination of these two trends resulted in critical realism “which is concerned with the depiction of the major aspects of social reality in the novel for the sake of criticizing and improving them.”<sup>100</sup> Khalīfah’s trilogy can be studied as critical realist literature given that in these three novels she depicts the social reality of Palestinians’ life under occupation. Khalīfah does not suggest any solutions for the social and political dilemmas depicted in her works. Rather, she takes a balanced stance as the narrator who criticises social reality through her characters.

It has been observed that critical realists “deny importance to all trends in literature, from classicism to surrealism.”<sup>101</sup> This objection is best exemplified by their disapproval of romanticism and its imaginary tendencies.<sup>102</sup> In other words, critical realists oppose the “subjectivity” of romanticism and promote “objectivity” which best serves their realist reflection of society.<sup>103</sup> First of all, Khalīfah’s trilogy cannot be seen

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<sup>98</sup> Al-Goaifli (1987), p. 65.

<sup>99</sup> Al-Goaifli considers Egyptian writers of ‘The New School’ (mentioned above) as examples of the first trend; reportage realism. However, ‘Abd al-Muḥsin T. Badr states that the seeds of reportage realism was planted by al-Ṭaḥṭāwī and carried on by ‘Alī Mubārak. Therefore, this first trend was developed by the first generation of Arab reformers *not* the later one as al-Goaifli claims. Also Badr argues that al-Muwaylīḥī’s and Ibrāhīm’s works constitute the second trend of giving ‘moral messages through fiction’. As mentioned above, this first generation of reformers based their moral messages on what they learned and adapted from Western literature without paying much attention to the literary characteristics while the second generation used fiction as its method of transmitting moral messages but did not care much for whether it is imaginary, realistic, or a combination of both. Therefore, both trends have reform at the core; the only major difference is the style in which the reformers transmitted their ideas. See Badr (1963), pp. 51-77.

<sup>100</sup> Al-Goaifli (1987), p. 65.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>102</sup> See Sayyid Ḥāmid al-Nassāj, *Fī al-Rūmānsīyah wa-l-wāqī‘īyah (Romanticism and Realism)*, (Al-Qāhirah: Maktabat Gharīb, 1981), pp. 82-3.

<sup>103</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 75-6. For more information about the co-relation between ‘objectivity’ as technical innovation and ‘realism’ as literary trend see Becker (1980), pp. 56-60. Also, in an earlier work, Becker highlights ‘objectivity’ as one of the techniques adopted by realists in their objection to and reaction against romanticism and its ‘subjectivity’. See Becker (1967), pp. 7, 28 & 34.

as an example of romantic subjective work. She narrates a number of love stories in her trilogy, yet they are not placed at the centre of the plot, and passionate romance is not the major axis around which the novels revolve. Her love stories are told with only the slightest hint of classical romanticism—most of her characters are involved with the national struggle, hence their portrayal highlights first and foremost their national engagement with very little attention paid to their emotional life. Even in occasional cases where reference is made to emotional relationships, such as Nūwār's, the emphasis is on how social and political struggles affect such a relationship, and not on the passionate love between Nūwār and Ṣāliḥ. Therefore, romantic relationships can be seen as part of Khalīfah's depiction of social reality but they function only as fragments of the entire picture. Furthermore, it is almost impossible to find a love story in Khalīfah's trilogy that ends happily. Towards the end of her novels, her characters' emotional lives remain ambiguous and unstable like the other social, economic, and political conditions in occupied Palestine during the assigned time frame of the Intifada. In this sense, Khalīfah's depiction can be regarded as objective and rational, not romantic.

For example, the relationship between Rafīf and 'Ādil in *Sunflower* is ruled by the harsh reality of the occupation, which has a significant effect on their social lives. Therefore, they are controlled by political and social restraints that deny Rafīf her complete freedom in expressing herself and drive her to irrational actions to express her frustration with her society. This relationship cannot be considered romantic despite the fact that both characters are portrayed as sensitive people. This leads to the conclusion that they both adapted to their harsh social reality and set aside romantic love for the

sake of a more practical relationship. Here, it is worth mentioning that the relationship between Nūwār and Ṣāliḥ, which starts in *Wild Thorns* and continues in *Sunflower*, can be seen as an exception in Khalīfah's trilogy. Nūwār remains entirely in love with Ṣāliḥ during his imprisonment. *Sunflower* ends with Ṣāliḥ still in prison and Nūwār expressing some frustration at this situation, but without an obvious aspiration to get herself out of this relationship with a prisoner. Their romantic love, however, is not the central story in *Wild Thorns* or *Sunflower*. In this sense, it can be seen as an exception that partially portrays one type of emotional relationships that exists in the occupied territories considering the number of imprisoned young men.

Secondly, Khalīfah, in her trilogy, is objective as a narrator who “almost completely [vanishes]; almost everything stated appears by way of reflection in the consciousness of the dramatis personae.”<sup>104</sup> That is, in the trilogy under study, we are not given Khalīfah's ‘objective information’ of certain objects and facts. Instead, we are presented by/to the characters’ feelings and thoughts of these objects and facts at a given time. The employment of multiple characters forms an important feature of this technique:

The design of a close approach to objective reality by means of numerous subjective impressions received by various individuals (and at various times) . . . differentiates it from the unipersonal subjectivism which allows only a single and generally a very unusual person to make himself heard and admits only that one person's way of looking at reality.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Trans. Willard R. Trask, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953; 1st ed. 1946), p. 534. See also Budayr (1981), p. 24.

<sup>105</sup> Auerbach (1953), p. 536.

Therefore, reality is best represented through the reflections of multiple characters, what might be called “the use of the group protagonist”.<sup>106</sup> This can be correlated to critical realists’ opposition to subjectivity and imaginative romanticism in literature “which does not relate to reality and which express the ‘I’ and totally neglect the ‘we’”.<sup>107</sup> This is the case in some works where the writer makes herself/himself the centre of the novel through the main character.

In her trilogy, Khalīfah does not narrate all the incidents around *one* central protagonist. Instead, the depiction of social conflict and political struggle is achieved by narrating the incidents through the feelings, thoughts, and experiences of a group of characters. ‘Ādil, Bāssel, Sa‘diyyah, Nūwār, Ṣāliḥ, Rafīf, Khaḍrah, Zakiyyah, Samar, Nuzha, and Ḥussām are simultaneously the protagonists of Khalīfah’s trilogy. Muhammad Siddiq describes Khalīfah’s characters as being chosen “carefully to represent the widest range of political views and social types on the Palestinian national spectrum, these characters remain equidistant from the author herself.”<sup>108</sup> This is manifested in the fact that this group of characters and their “spheres of experience remain almost autonomous as separate aspects of Palestinian society under occupation. They are often linked by internal incidental proximity . . . or geographical location.”<sup>109</sup> Yet the autonomy of these characters and their experiences assert their detachment from the author. For Siddiq, this characterisation emphasises the realistic feature of Khalīfah’s novels. Thus Khalīfah’s representation of social reality is done through an almost complete disappearance of her as a writer-narrator and a skilful reflection of

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<sup>106</sup> Becker (1980), p. 65.

<sup>107</sup> Al-Nassāj (1981), p. 118.

<sup>108</sup> See Siddiq, ‘The Fiction of Sahar Khalifah’, pp. 148-9.

<sup>109</sup> Mikhail-Ashrawi (1982), p. 273.

reality through a wide range of protagonists—her writing in the trilogy could not be seen as subjective.<sup>110</sup>

The last example of critical realists' opposition to subjectivity in literature is their rejection of works that "deal only with abstract ideas or aim only at artistic beauty. [Critical realists] sharply criticize the idea of art for art's sake".<sup>111</sup> Lukács reminds us that the "literature of realism, aiming at a truthful reflection of reality, must demonstrate both the concrete and abstract potentialities of human beings in extreme situations of this kind."<sup>112</sup> 'Abbās Khidr argues that "sheer artistic beauty which aims at pleasing the reader without meaningful message, promotes dullness, alienation and selfishness."<sup>113</sup> Hence, realistic literature which does not have an objective related to the society it reflects can be seen as "selfish literature" which is devoted to the worship of the artist himself/herself.<sup>114</sup> Khalīfah's resistance literature is far from being considered as abstract art since it aims at reflecting the struggle to liberate Palestinian occupied land. This notion is presented by Halim Barakat who examines Khalīfah's novels among Arabic "prerevolutionary writing [which is] committed to radical change."<sup>115</sup> In discussing this new genre, Barakat asserts that "writers are concerned about form, but never for its own sake. In their view, literary form emerges most naturally from a more

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<sup>110</sup> Like other Arab women writers of her generation and the previous generations, Khalīfah expresses subjectivity and individualism in some of her other works especially earlier novels such as *We Are No Longer Your Odalisques* (1974) and *Memoirs of an Unrealistic Woman* (1986); see Zeidan (1995), p. 178, and Siddiq, 'The Fiction of Sahar Khalifah', pp. 144-5. However, in the trilogy under study, Khalīfah remains objective and dedicated entirely to the nationalist and feminist causes through a realist portrayal of her environment.

<sup>111</sup> Al-Goaifli (1987), p. 66.

<sup>112</sup> Lukács (1979), p. 23.

<sup>113</sup> Khidr (1967), p. 13.

<sup>114</sup> It is worth mentioning that al-Ṭāhīr al-Hammāmī considers 'art for art's sake' as a feature of feudal/aristocratic art. He states that the art of the working-class must have an objective or purpose related to class struggle otherwise it could become merely art for art's sake which is distinctive to the aristocratic class. See al-Hammāmī (1984), p. 55.

<sup>115</sup> Barakat (1993), p. 229.

general vision of social reality. This sort of literature is able to subordinate politics to creative and reflective thinking and can thus undertake the task of promoting new consciousness.”<sup>116</sup> Therefore, the revolutionary and resistant nature of Khalīfah’s trilogy establishes its realism in the sense that it does not fit within the frame of art produced for art’s sake; as with the work of critical realists.

Here, it is worth mentioning that the realism of the Palestinian novel can be compared to the realism of the Egyptian novel during the fifties when the latter revealed “concentration on the basic preoccupations of the time. The conflict in these novels always centres on problems of a patriotic nature. The social, intellectual, economic or political themes interweave, somehow, with the national cause, and contribute to [the novel’s] development.”<sup>117</sup> Therefore, literature that engages with national causes and depicts daily realities which include economic and social struggles, or military action, can scarcely be considered an art for art’s sake.

Another characteristic that helps to identify Khalīfah’s trilogy as critical realist fiction is the fact that her novels mirror “the external and internal aspects of society.”<sup>118</sup> This concept of mirroring society is central to critical realism. Yet critical realists are specific in their demand that “the novel not limit itself to reflecting ‘the visible side of our daily life’ or ‘the apparent aspects of society,’ but rather ‘go behind social consciousness’ and ‘enter into the inner life of society’ until it uncovers the forces that

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., p. 238.

<sup>117</sup> Sabry Hafez, ‘The Egyptian Novel in the Sixties,’ in *Critical Perspectives on Modern Arabic Literature*, ed. Issa J. Boullata (Washington, DC: Three Continents Press, 1980), p. 173.

<sup>118</sup> Al-Goaifli (1987), p. 67.



are directing society by revealing ‘hidden social truths.’”<sup>119</sup> The act of unravelling the inner life of society by reflecting its depth in literature can be done by focusing either on the positive or the negative aspects, or on both. Critical realists differ in their choice of which side of reality to mirror thoroughly. Therefore, there are three trends of critical realists: the first calls for focusing on “the evil side of society”, the second calls for emphasising “the good side” of society, and the third demands equal attention for both evil and good sides of society.<sup>120</sup>

In the context of this chapter, I would like to argue that Khalīfah follows the third trend which demands the equal portrayal of both positive and negative sides of social reality. On the one hand, Khalīfah’s reflection of the positive side of Palestinian culture is illustrated through her portrayal of the strong solidarity among the people of small communities in Nāblus. This solidarity is the outcome of deep-rooted social traditions that impose strong ties within the community which are expressed through the features of generosity, sympathy and empathy, and unconditioned support. For instance, in *Wild Thorns* people support and sympathise with Abu Šāber, one of ‘Ādil’s co-workers in the Israeli factories, after the accident and the loss of his fingers. This is illustrated in ‘Ādil’s and Zuhdī’s actions to get him his compensation. Moreover, when al-Karmī’s house was destroyed at the end of *Wild Thorns*, everyone from the neighbourhood helps to re-build the house. This action is narrated at the beginning of *Sunflower*. In these first two novels, there are multiple examples of people sharing and exchanging food and other supplies during curfews. In *The Gate*, positive features are

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., pp. 69-70, quoting Maḥmūd Taymūr, *Al-‘Adab al-Hādif*, (Al-Qāhirah: Maktabat al-Ādāb, 1959), p. 162.

<sup>120</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 70.

demonstrated through the characters of Samar and Zakiyyah. Despite their harsh circumstances as women in Nāblus, these characters express great care towards the community. Samar protects her brother and hides him from the Israeli soldiers although he controls her life and beats her. Khalīfah's trilogy demonstrates how the occupation and the harsh daily reality imposed by the political situation help in emphasising these social traditions as means of ensuring community survival.

On the other hand, the reflection of the negative side of society can be observed in the portrayal of the backward treatment of women. For instance, the attempt of Nūwār's father to force her to marry a man she does not love, the hostile treatment Sa'diyyah receives when she starts her own business as a widowed woman with no man to protect her, and Nuzha's suffering and loneliness because of the stigma attached to the house of ill-repute. Khalīfah explores some of the internal and complex aspects of Palestinian society through discussing the suffering of these characters. Accordingly, Khalīfah's masterful portrayal of both positive and negative sides of society provides as complete a reflection as possible of daily social reality in the occupied territories; it creates a balanced vision of good and evil that helps to explore beneath the surface of contemporary Palestinian society. This comprehensive reflection which includes "the unpleasant, the exposed, [and] the sordid" side of reality is highly praised by Raymond Williams as establishing realism as a "watchword, passed over to the progressive and revolutionary movements."<sup>121</sup> Therefore, Khalīfah's employment of this kind of realistic reflection underpins the revolutionary and resistant approach of her trilogy.

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<sup>121</sup> Williams, 'Realism and the Contemporary Novel', p. 582.

Although critical realists demand that the novelist has to reflect particular aspects of social life, whether negative or positive, they do not pay much attention to whether this should be done by concentrating on a “particular segment of society”. According to al-Goaifli, this

might imply that they want the novelist to concentrate on dealing with social issues regardless of their origin rather than dealing with a specific social class or segment. This issue is a major one differentiating critical realism from socialist realism. Despite this generally held view, however, some critical realists ask for more attention to be paid to one particular social class, the poor.<sup>122</sup>

In her trilogy, Khalīfah tends to implement this feature by drawing as complete a picture as possible that includes all social segments with more attention to the poor.<sup>123</sup>

In the first two novels, she tackles in more detail the life of the lower classes in present-day occupied Palestinian towns and their social problems. Yet she also depicts upper class bourgeois families through al-Karmīs for instance. In *The Gate*, Khalīfah’s depiction of social problems highlights the persistent issue of class in occupied Palestine which continues to sustain old backward traditions that in turn affect national struggle. A good example of this point is the scene with Zakiyyah, the midwife, and her sister-in-law, Um ‘Azzām. When the latter seeks refuge at Zakiyyah’s, Zakiyyah responds to Um ‘Azzām’s suffering by asking her to be patient and go back to her house to avoid a social scandal that might affect the reputation of their prestigious family.<sup>124</sup> For Zakiyya, social traditions and the image of their social class are more important than Um ‘Azzām’s feelings of peace and dignity.

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<sup>122</sup> Al-Goaifli (1987), p. 90.

<sup>123</sup> See Cooke (1996), p. 216.

<sup>124</sup> See Harlow, ‘Partitions and Precedents’, pp. 127-8, referring to Khalīfah (1990), pp. 159-168.

Another example which illustrates the same issue is Ḥussām who leaves his home and joins the guerrilla fighters as a means of running away from the tyranny of his father who represents patriarchal bourgeois legacy. In *Wild Thorns* and *Sunflower*, the character of Shaḥādah presents the negative attitude of the poor through his reaction to the unequal treatment he suffered as a child from the bourgeoisie al-Karmīs. When the social hierarchy is changed by the Intifada and its new economic realities, Shaḥādah's attitude towards 'Ādil and Usāmah expresses an explicit manifestation of his newly gained financial power through which he attempts to win their respect and to cause them to fear him. This implies that his respect for, and fear of, their class before the Intifada was derived from their social status which was reflected in turn in their economic power.

A final example that illustrates Khalīfah's inclination to pay more attention to the poor is the character of Sa'diyyah. As a widow, Sa'diyyah struggles to provide her children with proper living and education. One of her major problems is dealing with her lower-class community that disapproves of her new job as a seamstress, mainly because she deals with men. Despite people's denunciation of her job, Sa'diyyah is determined to build herself a small house in the mountains, away from Bāb al-Sāḥah neighbourhood which is portrayed as socially backward and traditional. She wants to elevate herself up the social ladder by residing in a middle-class neighbourhood. The backwardness of Bāb al-Sāḥah's community is derived from their isolation from other social classes that allow women to work. Therefore, Khalīfah portrays ingeniously the character of Sa'diyyah and her struggle to reflect realistically on the hardships a single lower-class woman may face in a traditional community during times of occupation. It

also represents the hardships people go through in order to cross the delineated boundaries existing between social classes.

The abovementioned examples highlight the social changes that are imposed on Palestinian class structure because of the Israeli occupation through the realist representation of these changes in Khalīfah's work. There are different critical views on the relationship between politics and literary realism. First of all, Becker argues that we

must observe that realism was not . . . greatly involved in . . . political struggles. . . . But realism did aid and abet this movement by its interest in costume, custom, and speech, by its insistence on the legitimacy of human diversity through its stress on accurate depiction of minority groups and unconventional enclaves. In established cultures there was no need for the realist writer to be nationalistic ...<sup>125</sup>

Therefore, realism is supposed to be more concerned with social and ethnic structures within the depicted culture. Political and nationalist involvement is not necessary for realist literature to be deemed as such.

Secondly, critical realists tend to believe that reflecting politics is essential to the 'truthfulness' of the realistic novel. This can be done in three approaches: "One may deal with them for their own sake, or for the sake of presenting the author's own political views or affiliation, or merely to advocate certain political trends or theories."<sup>126</sup> However, reflecting political issues according to these methods can be problematic in the sense that this reflection might become subjective, an approach which is rejected by critical realists. Therefore, writers are encouraged to "concern themselves with political issues and events that clearly affect society, for the sake of

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<sup>125</sup> Becker (1980), pp. 15-16.

<sup>126</sup> Al-Goaifli (1987), p. 94.

‘understanding and presenting their impact on social life.’”<sup>127</sup> In this way, critical realist writers can be objective and truthful in their representation of politics as part of social reality.

On the same issue, ‘Abd al-Muḥsin Badr argues that the concern of the realistic novelist should be the impact of national issues on his/her society and not the “abstract value” of these issues.<sup>128</sup> Al-Goaifli highlights that it becomes clear

then, that to critical realists the author’s concern should be with ‘social matters’ and that he cannot merely attach them to other matters, but rather show their relationship. Such emphases have led to their being accused of attempting to turn writers into social mouthpieces and preachers, so in the final analysis suppressing the individuality of the writer and his personal concerns.<sup>129</sup>

From a more general perspective, Becker insists that in a realistic work, there “should be no authorial voice raised in way of commentary or exhortation, no authorial elbow nudging the reader in the ribs.”<sup>130</sup> Khalīfah’s tendency to portray both Palestinian and Israeli sides in her novels is clear evidence of not being attached to political issues in her realistic representation of Palestinian society under occupation. Rather she reflects their influence on people in the West Bank and attempts to draw a parallel reflection of the situation for Israeli settlers. Khalīfah tackles this new subject matter with a clear impulse to avoid preaching and exhortation.

For instance, in *Wild Thorns*, Usāmah assassinates an Israeli officer in a market in Old Town Nāblus. ‘Ādil who appears in the scene, carries the assassinated officer’s

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p. 94, quoting ‘Adnān Ṣāfī, *Aḥādīth Naqdīyah Ḥawla al-‘Adab al-Mu‘āṣir*, (Dimashq: Dār al-‘Arab, 1961), p. 43-4.

<sup>128</sup> ‘Abd al-Muḥsin T. Badr, *Ḥawla al-‘Adīb wa-l-wāqī‘ (On the Novelist and Reality)*, (Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1981; 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1971), pp. 36-9.

<sup>129</sup> Al-Goaifli (1987), p. 95.

<sup>130</sup> Becker (1967), p. 28.

daughter on his shoulders after comforting his wife. In the same scene, Um Şāber sympathises with the officer's wife and takes off her head scarf to cover the exposed legs of the officer's daughter who fainted following the assassination of her father. The portrayal of 'Ādil's and Um Şāber's reaction to the assassination does not affect these characters' Palestinian nationalism. On the contrary, it is a manifestation of these characters' humanity that does not conflict with their national affiliation. In this sense, Khalīfah's characters reflect the politics of occupied Palestine as part of a broader social and, perhaps more importantly, human setting. Since, in a realistic novel, the social life of the protagonists is expected to be associated with, and reflective of, the current national situation,<sup>131</sup> Khalīfah can therefore be considered a realistic author who represents *realistic nationalism* in contrast to those depictions that do not treat of nationalism's daily realities.

Producing *realistic nationalism* in literature involves a process of understanding, accepting, and expressing one's national affiliation in relation to the surrounding human and social reality. Cooke states that Khalīfah calls for "real nationalism", and not "naïve nationalism". For Khalīfah "[r]eal nationalism 'means to know and to love the nation with its rights and its wrongs, its sweet and its bitter, because without diagnosis there can be no prescription.'"<sup>132</sup> Moreover, Khalīfah states that her writings are national

in the sense that it stresses the identity of the Palestinian, his cultural feature, his language, his yearnings and sufferings. On the other hand, this identity does not deny the fact that there are other identities which [Palestinians] realize and recognize. [She also tries] to emphasize the

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<sup>131</sup> Ṭaha Wādī, *Ṣūrat al-Mar'ah fī al-Riwāyah al-Mu'āṣirah (The Portrayal of Women in the Contemporary Novel)*, (Al-Qāhirah: Markaz Kutub al-Sharq al-'Awsaṭ, 1973), p. 368.

<sup>132</sup> Cooke (1996), p. 170. Cooke is quoting from her unpublished interview with Khalīfah in Nablus, 29 May 1991.

fact that the Palestinian identity is not closed in on itself. The Palestinian nation is a part of the Arab nation, the Arab nation is a part of humanity.<sup>133</sup>

This statement clarifies Khalīfah's sense of nationalism, identified here as *realistic nationalism*, in as lucid a way as possible. The following argument provides examples of Khalīfah's practical application of such a belief in her literary works studied here.

The narrative concerning 'Ādil in *Wild Thorns* represents this attitude (as does Um Ṣāber in the above-mentioned example). 'Ādil's understanding and acceptance of the realities of the occupation is portrayed realistically by Khalīfah. Throughout *Wild Thorns* and *Sunflower*, 'Ādil attempts to find a way to co-exist with the Israelis.<sup>134</sup> His attitude, however, does not contrast with his nationalism as a Palestinian. On the contrary, nationalism that does not reflect day-to-day reality, implies a one-sided vision of national affiliation that hopes to return the land through armed resistance regardless of the actual facts and realities. This stance is exemplified by Usāmah whose beliefs and actions reject the presence of the Israelis. Khalīfah is a Palestinian writer who preserves the truthfulness of the Palestinian situation under occupation through portraying both types of nationalism: realistic and fundamentalist. Her portrayal of the social hardships of the people of Nāblus under the Israeli occupation can be perceived as balanced reflection of the harsh reality of Palestinians and Israelis due to the political situation. However, it is a very fine line that separates the political situation in occupied Palestine from the social realities there. Since Khalīfah in her fiction is mainly concerned with the portrayal of events through her distinct fictional lens without the suggestion of any

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<sup>133</sup> Nazareth, 'An Interview with Sahar Khalifeh', p. 84.

<sup>134</sup> See Brooks (2003), p. 61, quoting Zeidan (1995), pp. 179-180.



solution, she can be considered a “true realistic novelist” according to Badr’s and al-Goaifli’s classification.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this chapter I present a general overview of realism in literature: its rise, development, and sub-categories. I examine briefly the major distinctions between critical and socialist realism with special emphasis on the former. I also provide a historical survey of the rise and development of realism in Arabic literature and further illuminate on this survey by an examination of the main political and social factors that affect Arabic literary realism. I shed light on the principal aspects of political and social causes which affect realism in Palestinian literature to which Khalīfah’s works belong.

In the second part of this chapter, I examine in more detail critical realism and its literary characteristics. According to this argument, I study Khalīfah’s trilogy as critical realist literature given that, first of all, her novels do not illustrate her own subjectivity. Khalīfah does not indulge in imaginative romantic narration, nor does she separate herself from reality by neglecting the ‘we’. Besides, the fact that her literature is considered resistance literature is due to the fact that it does not deal with abstract ideas that serve as art for art’s sake. Resistance literature transcends artistic beauty for the sake of portraying, reflecting on, and suggesting possible transformations of human and social actions. Secondly, Khalīfah’s novels reflect in depth on both negative and positive aspects of political and human realities, though inevitably greater attention is paid to the former. Through such a demonstration, she highlights the dissolution of the

class structure in Palestinian society after the Israeli occupation and its impact on the national struggle. Finally, Khalīfah's representation of the political situation in occupied Palestine remains balanced; she attempts to reflect the situation of both Palestinians and Israelis. Her concern with politics does not exceed the limits of its effects on the social structure of the society she depicts.

Therefore, in this chapter I propose a new account of nationalism as encountered in Khalīfah's trilogy: *realistic nationalism*. Khalīfah introduces this type of literary nationalism through her realistic, yet balanced, portrayal of Palestinian nationalism in the occupied territories which does not conflict with the surrounding human and social realities. Furthermore Khalīfah can be seen as an *avant-garde* Arab women writer precisely because of her introduction of this new form of *realistic nationalism* in Palestinian resistance literature.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

### RESISTANCE OF VERISIMILITUDE:

#### KHALĪFAH'S REALISTIC NATIONALISM AND REALISTIC FEMINISM

The argument presented in the previous chapter establishes that Khalīfah implements in her trilogy some of the major aspects of critical realist literature. Hence Khalīfah's trilogy can be considered as critical realist Palestinian resistance fiction. There are, however, certain features and characteristics that further define the realism of any Arabic novel. In this chapter I will examine Khalīfah's critical realist representations of Palestinian feminism and nationalism in her trilogy in order to further emphasise her introduction and application of *realistic nationalism* (discussed above) and propose *realistic feminism* as a new term to describe Khalīfah's representation of Palestinian feminism. I therefore highlight Khalīfah's avant-gardism in introducing these new literary concepts to Palestinian resistance literature.

#### VERISIMILITUDE IN KHALĪFAH'S TRILOGY

Both socialist and critical realists require that a realistic work must exhibit specific characteristics. Al-Goaifli examines some of the components and narrative

techniques that have to be included for the realistic novel to achieve its goal of creating 'verisimilitude'.<sup>1</sup> He lists these components as: events, characterisation, stream of consciousness, and setting and time.<sup>2</sup> In this chapter I examine the manifestation of these components in Khalīfah's trilogy.

- **EVENTS**

The events form the basic structure of the novel. In the realistic novel, each event plays a considerable role in supporting the plot that cannot stand independently by providing necessary information about the social, historical, political, and geographical background. More to the point, in the realistic novel, each event has to play a specific role and be an active factor in the development of the plot.<sup>3</sup> Hence these events help in establishing and enriching the concept of the ordinary, or the quotidian, that stamps the novel with its realistic quality.<sup>4</sup>

Becker highlights the necessity of events in the realistic novel to be "ordinary" even at the risk of "oversimplifying". He suggests that the novelist "must make a conscious movement away from the exciting and unusual to the humdrum and average, although it is possible also for him to bring the former closer to the average by use of

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<sup>1</sup> 'Abd al-Muhsin Badr states that verisimilitude is one of the main features that distinguish the realistic novel from its predecessors. He further highlights that the verisimilitude of the story deeply affects the way in which the writer deals with events, plot, and characterisation. See Badr (1963) pp. 192-3.

<sup>2</sup> Al-Goaifli (1987), pp. 150-1. It is worth mentioning that Wādī highlights characterisation, time, and setting as the three main components of the realistic novel. See Wādī (1973), pp. 256-7. I choose to draw on al-Goaifli's argument since it is more comprehensive and recent.

<sup>3</sup> See al-Goaifli (1987), p. 154.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 152. For more information on the concept of the 'ordinary, contemporary, everyday reality' and its interconnection with literary realism see Williams, 'Realism and the Contemporary Novel', pp. 581-2.

homely detail.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, the realistic novel cannot contain “imaginative, romantic, and extraordinary events”. Al-Goaifli argues that

while imagination is necessary for the realist so that he does not become a mere reporter of social events, it must be limited by the boundaries of verisimilitude. Consequently, realist critics reject not only the extraordinary, but all events that appear illogical or exaggerated. . . . The second rule of the plot is that events ought to be consistent with the actual norms of the society in which the novel is set. Critics oppose, for example, the depicting of events that indicate a complete freedom in male-female relationships in Arabic society.<sup>6</sup>

On the one hand, in Khalīfah’s trilogy, it is hard, if not impossible to find ‘illogical or exaggerated’ events. Her description of places and people that are involved in a certain event aesthetically imbues them with their qualities of ‘ordinariness’. The opening event of *Wild Thorns* with Usāmah al-Karmī returning home to Nāblus is a good example. The investigation he had to go through at the checkpoint can be considered an ‘ordinary event’ that is possible to happen to any young Palestinian man returning home. The prolonged questioning by the Israeli soldier is reported using both Arabic and Hebrew phrases and expressions. The length of the investigation and the languages used exemplify how such interviews happen in reality. Finally, Usāmah’s reaction upon hearing the tortured screams of the female Palestinian detainee cannot be seen as exaggeration. Though the normal reaction that might come to the reader’s mind is that Usāmah would express his disapproval of what he is hearing, as might be the case in a romantic or adventure narrative, he remains calm. This is the behaviour of any

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<sup>5</sup> Becker (1980), p. 68.

<sup>6</sup> Al-Goaifli (1987), pp. 152-3.

Palestinian, even a guerrilla fighter, who wants to cross the checkpoint avoiding as little trouble with the Israeli guards as possible.

Additionally, Khalīfah's depiction of male-female relationships in occupied Palestine can be considered as realistic. The spatial and social segregation between men and women is clear. There is not a single incident in which a love relationship is practised casually in public. An example of this is the love relationship between Samar and Ḥussām in *The Gate*. While the latter was injured, Samar can only be with him in Nuzha's house, the house of ill-repute, away from the eyes of others. The location of this love relationship between the feminist Samar and the guerrilla fighter Ḥussām in the house of ill-repute establishes the subversive feature of this relationship. However, it gives them the chance of being together, the event which is unlikely to happen in another space.

Another example is the relationship between 'Ādil and Rafīf in *Sunflower*. There are multiple scenes in which both characters express internally and solipsistically a desire to touch one another. This, however, is not possible because of social restrictions. In a sense, this affects their relationship since they are prevented from expressing their feelings and needs in the way they want. This emotional deprivation makes them question the validity and basis of their relationship.

It is worth mentioning that 'Ādil and Rafīf are allowed a degree of greater freedom in their relationship than Samar and Ḥussām. The former couple can take walks together in the streets and hold hands in public. This behaviour cannot be practised by Samar and Ḥussām mainly because the former couple is counted among the educated working class Palestinians, on whom social restrictions weigh less heavily.

As for the latter couple, although both are educated, the confinements of their community and neighbourhood limit their relationship and make their meetings happen secretly. Besides, the fact that Ḥussām is a guerrilla fighter leads to more secrecy around their relationship. Khalīfah's portrayal of these fluctuating love relationships is highly realistic. It could have been romantic or even adventurous if the lovers were to challenge society by publicly expressing and living out their feelings for one another. In the daily reality of occupied Palestine, this is not the case; the land and the national cause come first. This is how Khalīfah has chosen to depict faithfully her characters and the political realities which circumscribe their emotional choices.

Moreover, the events in a realistic novel must correspond with the factual historical, political, and geographical setting.<sup>7</sup> Khalīfah remains faithful to such facts in her trilogy. The historical background to *Wild Thorns* and *Sunflower* is the aftermath of the 1967 Arab defeat by Israel. In *The Gate*, the first Palestinian Intifada is the central historical political fact around which the plot revolves. Furthermore, Khalīfah's historical events, that is, exterior events, loose "their hegemony [and] serve to release and interpret inner events"<sup>8</sup> which is another essential element of objective realistic literature. In terms of geography, the events take place in the city of Nāblus with its popular old-town neighbourhoods. Hence, Khalīfah's ordinary events accord with the historical and geographical facts against which they have been narrated.

While dealing with events, critics, such as Ḥilmī Budayr, consider the opening and closing events of special importance in forming the plot. Yet the closing events

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>8</sup> Auerbach (1953), p. 538.



seem to attract more the attention of critics than opening events.<sup>9</sup> This might be because “many authors rely on concluding events to convey their final clear message to the readers. Critics’ primary controversy regarding these events is whether they should neatly tie up the plot or leave it open-ended. . . . Leaving the end open appears to be favored by most of the critics; . . . in reality a series of events has no clearcut end.”<sup>10</sup> Becker too argues in favour of the “less emphatic, less resolved”<sup>11</sup> endings of realistic novels. He draws attention to the fact that crises should be “lived through without decisive change of direction; life goes on; neither epiphanies nor turning points are part of normal experience.”<sup>12</sup>

Khalīfah’s three novels have open endings. *Wild Thorns* ends with al-Karmī’s house being blown up by the Israelis and ‘Ādil finally taking action by leaving behind his father’s dialysis machine to be blown up with the house. This open ending is not linked to the opening scene of *Sunflower* which finds ‘Ādil and Rafīf arguing over crossing the street. In the same way, *Sunflower* resists closure with the scene of Sa‘diyyah and other women and young men fighting against the Israeli soldiers, with an uncertain outcome. *The Gate* opens with women’s reception at Zakiyyah’s, the midwife, for her stepmother’s funeral. However, like *Sunflower* it ends with the scene of Nuzha and the people of Bāb al-Sāḥah district attempting to destroy the gate built by the Israelis to block the entrance to their neighbourhood. Therefore, in her trilogy Khalīfah portrays the ‘events’ realistically in terms of their ordinariness, reflective of historical, political, and geographical conditions of the period, and purposefully open-ended.

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<sup>9</sup> Budayr (1981), pp. 277-8.

<sup>10</sup> Al-Goaifli (1987), pp. 160-1.

<sup>11</sup> Becker (1980), p. 69.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

- **CHARACTERISATION**

The second essential component that defines realistic novels is the chosen method of characterisation. Ṭaha Wādī regards the novel primarily as an “art of characterisation”.<sup>13</sup> In realism, characterisation is considered the focal point around which dramatic events, dialogue, and soliloquy develop. Hence, characterisation is essential in the sense that it connects all elements in order to present the intellectual and social development in the novel through the relationship between characters and their environment.<sup>14</sup> For writers to implement characterisation realistically, they have to pay special attention to these aspects: “the character type, the appropriateness of the character’s actions to his or her social conditions, the appropriateness of the character’s actions to his or her personality as depicted in the novel.”<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, in the realistic novel, the category of the ‘ordinary’ applies to characters as well to events. Becker underlines the correlation between

the use of average characters, and the use of ordinary events. . . . the two are so inseparable as to constitute a single aspect of realism. Both are a reaction against the heightened and exceptional narratives of the preceding literary vogue; both are a denial of the truth of romantic fiction. If there is a bias from which the realist starts, it is a bias toward the commonplace.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Wādī (1973), p. 97.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 330.

<sup>15</sup> Al-Goaifli (1987), p. 164.

<sup>16</sup> Becker (1980), p. 68. On the same issue, ‘Abd al-Muḥsin T. Badr underlines the correlation between characters and events in the realistic novel: both have to be derived from reality. He further highlights that any change in the characters’ behaviour or attitude has to correspond or lead to a change in the events. Like Becker, Badr argues that such characteristics underpin the improvement realism brought to the genre. See Badr (1963), pp. 196-197.

Therefore, realistic novels cannot have an extraordinary or romantic hero; they instead narrate the story of “a hero without heroism, a man-on-the-street protagonist.”<sup>17</sup> The figure of ‘a man-on-the-street protagonist’ is valid in Khalīfah’s trilogy: ‘Ādil, Usāmah, Bāssel, Sa’diyyah, Nūwār, Samar, and Ḥussām are all ‘average’.<sup>18</sup>

One of the distinctive features of this portrait of the ‘hero without heroism’ is that such a protagonist is not depicted by emotional extremes (as completely good or completely evil) throughout the novel.<sup>19</sup> Such representation is derived from the fact that in the realistic novel, the dynamism of the characters stems from their interaction with their environment and society. In this sense, the portrayal of these protagonists reflects the society in which they exist. Since human societies cannot be either completely ‘good’ or absolutely ‘evil’ in moral terms, then characters cannot be portrayed in this way in the realistic novel.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, these ‘heroes without heroism’ must be depicted in a way that illustrates the different facets of their personalities in a holistic and balanced way. None of these characters is perfect: they all make mistakes of different kinds.

Thus, in Khalīfah’s trilogy all characters are portrayed by a realist fusion of balanced moral qualities. Even those characters who are meant to represent negative sides of society, such as prostitutes, are represented in a way that shows the good sides of their personalities, which can be seen as a socially radical gesture. In this way, the

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<sup>17</sup> Al-Goaifli (1987), p. 164. See also Budayr (1981), p. 165.

<sup>18</sup> Siddiq highlights that in *Wild Thorns* characterisation “is immanently realistic. By this I mean that it endows characters with psychological depth and dispositional qualities that motivate their behaviour and inform their self-expression.” See Siddiq, ‘The Fiction of Sahar Khalifah’, p. 148.

<sup>19</sup> Wādī (1973), pp. 368, 241. ‘Abd al-Muḥsin T. Badr argues that depicting only one side of the human character as ultimately good or ultimately evil is characteristic of the romantic novel and other genres which preceded the realistic novel. See Badr (1963), p. 196.

<sup>20</sup> Wādī (1973), pp. 263-4.

reader is allowed to respond sympathetically to the conventionally marginalised and maligned figure of the prostitute, and recognise that they are society's victim. Khaḍrah from *Sunflower* and Nuzha from *The Gate* represent this type of character. On the other hand, the negative sides of good characters, such as 'Ādil, are represented clearly. The negative aspects of 'Ādil's character is portrayed in his inability to face his father, to take incisive decisions, to offer advice to his sister, or to express his love to his girlfriend. This kind of representation identify 'Ādil, Khaḍrah, and Nuzha as ordinary characters.

It is worth mentioning here that Usāmah and Ḥussām are perhaps portrayed with a slight touch of romanticism and sensitivity in comparison to the rest of the protagonists. This element of romanticism does not affect the predominant realism of these two characters. Rather it draws the attention to the fact that guerrilla fighters can experience, even if only occasionally, romantic feelings; their militarism does not need to blunt their capacity for emotional sensitivity. Indeed, their sensitivity and romanticism is seen to inspire their decision to join guerrilla fighters and fight against the occupation to save the honour of land. These characters cannot be considered as romantic because they are not prone to lead imaginative romantic lives. Rather, they subdue their romantic feelings for the sake of national struggle. Therefore, these characters are portrayed realistically; despite their romanticism, they are prone to take action rather than leading a conventionally romantic life.

The second means to achieve verisimilitude in characterisation is "the appropriateness of the characters' actions to the social conditions under which they

live.”<sup>21</sup> In this sense, characters must act in a way that fits with the social customs and standards of the society that is depicted in the novel. Generally speaking, some Arab novelists violate this characteristic in their depiction of intimate relationships and sexual behaviour in Arab societies.<sup>22</sup> This violation does not exist in Khalīfah’s trilogy as the above mentioned examples about ‘Ādil and Rafīf and Ḥussām and Samar illustrate.

The third step is that characters

must also act appropriately in terms of their depiction in the novel. [It is] unrealistic for a character to behave appropriately in one situation and inappropriately in another without clear reason for the change. [It is demanded also] that the character’s actions be consistent with his emotions and values. Depiction of a patriotic character who suddenly betrays his country would violate this kind of decorum.<sup>23</sup>

‘Abd al-Muḥsin Badr points up that such contradictory shifts in depicting the characters’ actions may result from the writer’s subjectivity, significantly affecting the objectivity of the realistic novel.<sup>24</sup> In Khalīfah’s trilogy, none of the main characters changes his or her behaviour suddenly. In *The Gate*, Zakiyyah’s unfair treatment to Um ‘Azzām, her sister-in-law, when the latter seeks help is explained by Zakiyyah’s fear of social traditions and constraints. Zakiyyah expresses a similar attitude with her hesitation to talk to Nuzha, visit the latter’s house, or even to allow Samar to stay in the house of ill-reputed women so as to protect the young woman’s reputation. Therefore, Zakiyyah is consistent in her attitude in preserving social prestige and reputation. Accordingly, the element of ‘characterisation’ is manifested realistically in Khalīfah’s

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<sup>21</sup> Al-Goaifli (1987), p. 174. See also Budayr (1981), p. 114.

<sup>22</sup> See Badr (1981), pp. 151-2.

<sup>23</sup> Al-Goaifli (1987), pp. 177-8.

<sup>24</sup> Badr (1963), p. 327.

trilogy by emphasising the ordinariness of the characters embodied in a mixture of balanced moral principles. These ordinary characters behave appropriately within their social environment without any unexpected fluctuation in their behaviour.

- **STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS**

Besides events and characterisation, the device of the narrative stream of consciousness is considered one of the most important features of a realistic literary work. Aḥmad Abū Maṭar underlines the interrelationship between the “internal reality” and the “external reality” of characters. For him, depicting reality can only reach perfection through the reflection of interior reality and the characters’ emotions, feelings, hopes, desires, pains, views, opinions and all what consists the human consciousness.<sup>25</sup> Hence, stream of consciousness serves as a perfect tool to disclose the character’s inner thoughts and feelings through its techniques of interior monologue (whether direct or indirect), omniscient description, and soliloquy.<sup>26</sup> Besides, stream of consciousness and monologue are among the major devices which are employed to “express the contents of the consciousness of the dramatis personae”<sup>27</sup> in objective realistic literature.

In Khalīfah’s trilogy, ‘Ādil’s character is revealed mostly through his inner monologues. For instance, we learn about ‘Ādil’s reaction to his father’s attempt to force Nūwār to marry that doctor through his inner monologue. In the same way, ‘Ādil does not reveal to Rafīf his emotions and desires, yet his feelings are revealed through

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<sup>25</sup> Abū Maṭar (1980), p. 288.

<sup>26</sup> Humphrey (1954), pp. 4, 23-33. A more detailed illustration of these techniques is provided in Chapter Four. See also Abū Maṭar (1980), p. 290 and Muḥibbah Hājj Ma’tūq, *Athar al-Riwāyah al-Wāqī’iyah al-Gharbīyah fī al-Riwāyah al-‘Arabīyah (The Influence of the Western Realistic Novel on the Arabic Novel)*, (Bayrūt: Dār al-Fikr al-Lubnānī, 1994), pp. 312-17.

<sup>27</sup> Auerbach (1953), p. 535.

his monologues. The same applies to Rafīf, Usāmah and Ḥussām. Usāmah's strange behaviour and reaction to the situation in Nāblus upon his return are explained in dialogues with others such as 'Ādil, or monologues such as his inner monologue upon his visit to al-Karmī's farm and his conversation with Abu Shaḥādah. Rafīf's interior monologues serve best to reveal the misery of Palestinian women in their patriarchal reactionary society.<sup>28</sup>

It is worth mentioning that Khalīfah's application of stream of consciousness in her trilogy is limited. Her work, however, can still be considered realistic since it does not cross the threshold of becoming a psychological narrative: "the use of stream of consciousness in the realist novel should not replicate its use in the psychological novel."<sup>29</sup> In her application of stream of consciousness, Khalīfah avoids the use of extraordinary abilities such as perfect memory. Thus she avoids "what might be called the psychological use of the stream of consciousness".<sup>30</sup> She remains faithful in her realistic portrayal of the actions, behaviour, and characteristics of ordinary people. Thus, Khalīfah creates a holistic realistic picture by portraying the interior reality of her characters using techniques such as stream of consciousness and interior monologues without trespassing onto the threshold between the realistic novel and the psychological novel.

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<sup>28</sup> For more information about 'monologues' in Khalīfah's novels see Siddiq, 'The Fiction of Sahar Khalifah', p. 155.

<sup>29</sup> Al-Goaifli (1987), p. 186. According to 'Abd al-Muḥsin Badr, the focus in the psychological novel is on one central character through which the author reflects his/her own beliefs and emotions, mostly through stream of consciousness. This contradicts one of the main characteristics of the Arabic realistic novel which is the use of a group of protagonists. See Badr (1963), p. 130.

<sup>30</sup> Al-Goaifli (1987), p. 186.

- **SETTING AND TIME**

The final means of creating verisimilitude in the realistic novel is setting and time. There are three types of setting: “material (houses, streets, shops), social (customs, practices, and popular beliefs), and natural (trees, landscapes, seasons, climatic conditions). All three types function to establish a relationship between characters and their world and to persuade the reader to belief [*sic*] in that world.”<sup>31</sup> Becker asserts the importance of setting in the realistic novel as it expresses the realists’

reaction against sentimentality and gigantism in character presentation . . . Thus the heaping up of physical data became important: the place in which people reside, the processes of their jobs, the minutiae of daily living were set forth in painstaking detail. Realistic works are characterized by a physical density which is often overwhelming. We cannot be told that life in the slum stultifies, that contemporary suburban existence is straitening and boring; we must experience it in wearisome representation, as the slum-dwellers or suburbanites themselves do.<sup>32</sup>

Moreover, according to Ma’tūq, in the realistic novel, a description of a setting whether material, social, or natural cannot be decorative. It has to be purposeful in that it asserts and completes the physical and psychological image of characters. Therefore, setting in the realistic novel is not separate and independent from the character; rather it is part of it.<sup>33</sup>

Khalīfah’s choice of material setting is realistic in the sense that she uses the names of existing cities and towns and describes them in a way recognisable to those who have been there. In *Sunflower* and *The Gate*, she names local mountains such as

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 187.

<sup>32</sup> Becker (1967), pp. 30-31.

<sup>33</sup> Ma’tūq (1994), p. 202.



‘Aybāl and al-Shamālī.<sup>34</sup> Besides, at the beginning of *Wild Thorns* there is a reference to the Allenby Bridge; the only exit point for West Bank Palestinians into Jordan. She also describes the architecture of her characters’ houses. We are familiar with al-Karmī’s house, as Zuhdī’s and Sa‘diyyah’s house, Nuzha’s house, and Zakiyyah’s. Yet these descriptions are provided within the appropriate limits that create the necessary realistic atmosphere in the novels without excessive details.

The portrayal of social customs and traditions is satisfactory in Khalīfah’s trilogy. The idea of arranged marriage is introduced through the story of Nūwār. Social restrictions and taboos are illustrated successfully through the character of Nuzha and the house of ill-repute. It is worth mentioning here that social settings occupy a major part of Khalīfah’s trilogy. Although the main setting is the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the repercussions of this conflict are illustrated in relation to the social background of Palestinians under occupation. This kind of preoccupation with social setting is praised by critics and considered a rich contribution to the realistic novel. Al-Goaifli justifies this consideration by assuming that critics generally believe that “the novel ought to be a detailed presentation and analysis of a slice of society.”<sup>35</sup> Budayr points out that detailed description of characters, settings, and incidents highlights the realism of a literary work. He considers these thorough reflections as articulations of the author’s actual acquaintance and association with the physical, psychological, and social environment upon which the literary work is based.<sup>36</sup> However, this belief does not apply to detailed description of material or natural settings.

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<sup>34</sup> See Khalīfah (1987), p. 252 and Khalīfah (1990), pp. 16, 10.

<sup>35</sup> Al-Goaifli (1987), pp. 190-1.

<sup>36</sup> Budayr (1981), p. 135.

Therefore, Khalīfah provides the reader with a limited description of natural settings that are necessary to complete the general description of material and, most importantly, social settings. *Wild Thorns* opens with Usāmah returning to Nāblus. Khalīfah's description of the landscapes through which Usāmah passes in his trip creates a general picture against which further details are provided later in the novel. In this way, Khalīfah's natural setting can be seen as the general frame of other settings. Furthermore, description of districts, streets, and alleys are completed by descriptions of weather and seasons. Hence, Khalīfah meets critics' demand that natural setting "should be presented in accordance with the season during which the events of the novel take place and within the geographic area chosen as the location of action."<sup>37</sup>

Therefore, Khalīfah meets all essential elements of a satisfactory realistic setting and complies with the general agreement between critics and novelists "that the vivid presentation of setting is a major aid in creating conviction in the reader."<sup>38</sup> Khalīfah's realistic method of applying setting and time elements in her trilogy does not exceed the limits recognised by realist critics such as Fathī al-Ībyārī, Ḥusām al-Khaṭīb, Aḥmad 'Aṭīya, and 'Abd al-Muḥsin Badr to name a few. These critics are joined by certain others who "object to the lengthy presentation of details of setting, especially the material."<sup>39</sup> Their objection is based on different considerations: the lengthy description of material setting, places, and random objects is more likely to interrupt the

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<sup>37</sup> Al-Goaifli (1987), p. 191.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 189.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 189.

development of narrative and plot, and might affect the dramatic fluency of events in the novel.<sup>40</sup>

The realistic setting of time is also necessary in order to complete the requirements of the realistic novel. In this sense,

time must be clearly and realistically present. Further, realistic critics are concerned not only with time within the novel, but with external time as well. . . . one of the chief characteristics of the realistic novel is . . . the correspondence between the internal time frame, represented by the age of the characters, and the external time frame, represented by the actual stage of history in which events take place.<sup>41</sup>

This ‘correspondence’ is valid in Khalīfah’s trilogy. She always connects her characters’ ages with historical events. In *Wild Thorns*, Nūwār was in her early twenties about to graduate and become a teacher.<sup>42</sup> In *Sunflower*, Nūwār is a maturer young woman in her mid twenties. In the same way, in the first novel, Bāssel is a high school student whose audacious actions lack discipline; for instance when he hid the explosives in his family’s house and caused the house to be blown up by the Israelis. In the second novel, he is a mature young man whose actions are based on analysis and logic. This is expressed in his attitude to help to implement both ‘Ādil’s and Rafīf’s projects in the magazine.

The employment of the external and internal time simultaneously is regarded by Ma’tūq as one of the aspects that stamps a literary work with objective realism. She states that together both aspects of time form one harmonious entity: external time sets the general social and historical realistic frame, internal time follows up the

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<sup>40</sup> See ‘Abd Allah (1971), pp. 334-5.

<sup>41</sup> Al-Goaifli (1987), p. 192.

<sup>42</sup> See Khalīfah (2005), p. 32.

developments of the characters' psyche. Therefore, internal and external time co-exist to create the realistic atmosphere of the novel.<sup>43</sup>

Moreover, another rule to which Khalīfah adheres in her application of time setting is the way in which realists present the external time frame. Instead of mentioning the exact year in which the events take place directly, realists may present the external time frame by "referring to major social or political events or by having characters discuss singers, songs, or actors popular at the time in which the novel is set."<sup>44</sup> In Khalīfah's trilogy, there is not a direct mention of the year in which the events happen. Instead, there are indirect indications. For instance, at the beginning of *Wild Thorns* Usāmah refers to that period by "after the occupation", that is; the Israeli occupation of West Bank and Gaza Strip after the 1967 Arab defeat by Israel. Similarly, in *The Gate* there is indirect reference to the eruption of the Intifada with some characters' saying: "since the eruption of the Intifada" or by referring to guerrilla fighters, the fidā'een, and the demonstrations in which young Palestinian children fight Israelis with stones.

In Khalīfah's trilogy, the characters never discuss popular songs or singers, perhaps because of the nature of the resistance novel where the focus must be on the national cause in opposition to the social or artistic entertainment. Sabry Hafez emphasises this point in his study of the Egyptian novel in the fifties. He argues that "[p]atriotic concerns provide the focal point in most [realistic] novels, and the writer's attitudes are perpetually directed against his country's enemies and the obstacles which

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<sup>43</sup> Ma'tūq (1994), pp. 272-9.

<sup>44</sup> Al-Goaifli (1987), p. 193.

stand in the way of Egypt's progress."<sup>45</sup> Hence traditionally in resistance novels there is hardly any interest or space to explore artistic and cultural topics. However, there are few instances in which reference to folk songs and singers are mentioned within the context of popular memory or nostalgia to the times before the occupation by Israel. Usāmah's journey back home in the taxi was described with Fairūz' song playing in the back.<sup>46</sup> In the same way, Bāssel, in *Sunflower* travels to Jerusalem by taxi. This trip recalls Usāmah's trip to Nāblus. We, however, hear 'Abd-al Ḥalīm Ḥāfiẓ and Ṣabāḥ in the background.<sup>47</sup> Though these singers are popular at all times, not only during the specific time frame of the novels, by referring to them, Khalīfah completes the realistic features of these novels.

The narration of popular social histories is another method of Khalīfah's exploration of realism. In *Sunflower*, she describes the public bath and its rituals before and after the Israeli occupation. She presents women's traditions and customs at their weekly gatherings in public baths. This has been narrated in reference to the problem of water shortage as a result of the Israelis' control of water resources in Palestine.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, Khalīfah narrates popular history by reference to recent facts such as water shortage. Consequently, in Khalīfah's trilogy, the material, social, and natural settings are portrayed realistically in the sense that they provide enough details to create a convincing atmosphere within which the characters and events develop. This realism is

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<sup>45</sup> Hafez, 'The Egyptian Novel', p. 173.

<sup>46</sup> See Khalīfah (2005), p. 5. Fairūz is a Lebanese diva. She is one of the most prominent Arab singers who started singing in the 1950s with al-Raḥabānī brothers. Her songs are reflective of and related to the social/cultural setting of the Levant. To the present day, she and her songs are considered of special importance to the affiliation of the Levant.

<sup>47</sup> See Khalīfah (1987), p. 234.

<sup>48</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 155-6.

further emphasised through her representation of co-existing external and internal time frames.

- **LANGUAGE**

Finally, I would like to examine a number of other characteristics that stamp a realist imprint on Khalīfah's trilogy and which have not yet received exhaustive consideration by critics. One of these vital features is language. Jayyūsī states that: "No other Palestinian writer of fiction has equalled [Khalīfah's] capacity to reproduce the rhythms, intonations, vocabulary, and cast of mind of the Palestinian urban classes—menial workers and intellectuals alike—and she reveals great artistic decorum in the way she varies her language according to the status and education of the character she is delineating."<sup>49</sup> Khalīfah is one of the few Arab writers who implement in their writings the combination of modern standard Arabic with a colloquial dialect. In her trilogy, there are ample examples where she uses vernacular Palestinian phrases in conversations and description of places and events. This literary style is considered unusual taking into account that the majority of Arabic novels are written in modern standard Arabic which becomes a distinctive feature of the genre of the Arabic novel, especially contemporary.<sup>50</sup> This can be regarded as the outcome of the hard battle the novel fought to be proved in comparison to Arabic poetry which relies heavily on classical Arabic and modern standard Arabic. Besides, during the 1950s, when the

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<sup>49</sup> Jayyūsī (1992), p. 42.

<sup>50</sup> See Badāwī, 'The Background', p. 1 where he defines modern Arabic literature as 'literature written exclusively in the Arabic language', that is, modern standard Arabic.

Arabic novel started being accepted as a literary genre, using modern standard Arabic was a method of emphasising the Arabs' identity against those of the colonisers.<sup>51</sup>

In the case of contemporary Palestinian literature, Mikhail-Ashrawi regards this new style that instigates "the language of everyday speech" as "progressive". She considers this linguistic technique as "the result of social and political changes in Palestinian society itself which is undergoing revolutionary changes in its refusal to be shackled by traditional social norms as well as by political oppression."<sup>52</sup> Thus Khalīfah's skilful combination of modern standard Arabic and vernacular Palestinian can be seen as a distinctive feature that stamps her trilogy with a "progressiveness" which is reflective to her calls for political and social freedom in Palestinian society. Such techniques indicate the uniqueness of Khalīfah's trilogy among other modern Arabic literature, especially Palestinian.

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<sup>51</sup> It is worth mentioning that a similar attitude occurred in the writings of early Arab novelists during the mid-nineteenth century. For instance, Muḥammad 'Uthmān Jalāl (1829-94), al-Ṭahtāwī's pupil, embarked upon translating some of the major works of French literature such as Molière's and La Fontaine's during that period. This is considered a major contribution to the development of modern Arabic fiction in Egypt. However, in his translations, Jalāl initiated the style of 'egyptianising' the context of the French works by using Egyptian characters and settings. One of the most remarkable features of Jalāl's translations of Western literature is his choice of 'simple expressive language' and a 'colloquial verse for the rendering of even the loftiest of tragedies.' This was Jalāl's method of complying with the customs and traditions of the Arab nation and to attract more audience. In this sense, 'Jalāl evidently shared al-Ṭahtāwī's belief that literature is not an art which exists for its own sake, but one that fulfils the dual functions of instruction and entertainment.' Such a statement implies that the seeds of realism were planted as early as al-Ṭahtāwī's times. It also suggests that realism is connected to the use of simple regional language to attract a greater audience and reflect on the real society in which it is written. However, this was only a temporary step in the process of the rise of the Arabic novel and it was not to become a trend in Arabic literature especially with the influence of intellectuals such as al-'Afghānī who called the Muslims to return to their Arabic language, the language of the Qur'ān, in order to defeat the Western infidels. In this sense, the style of mixing modern standard Arabic with vernacular dialect can be considered relatively new to modern Arabic literature. See Moosa (1997), pp. 12-14. See also Allen, 'The Beginnings', p. 183, and Pierre Cachia, 'Introduction: Translations and Adaptations 1834-1914' in *Modern Arabic Literature*, M. M. Badāwī (Ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 23-35 (28-9).

<sup>52</sup> Mikhail-Ashrawi (1982), p. 205.

Khalīfah's implementation of Palestinian vernacular alongside modern standard Arabic should be seen as a method through which she reflects realistically on her society. According to Mikhail-Ashrawi, this new linguistic technique reveals "a reaction in favor of a new reality which demands its own themes and language."<sup>53</sup> Khalīfah justifies this attitude by the fact that most of her characters come from "the slums" and that "this is the way they express their lives."<sup>54</sup> While the dialogues of intellectuals such as 'Ādil, Raffī, and Samar are recounted in modern standard Arabic, Khalīfah utilises Palestinian vernacular in narrating dialogues related to uneducated simple characters such as Khaḍrah, Sa'diyyah, Zakiyyah, Nuzha, Shaḥādah, and Zuhdī. Becker highlights the importance of such linguistic style in realism. He points out that if middle-class characters "speak in highfalutin' terms they are pretentious and potentially ridiculous. There is too great a disparity between the elevation of their language and the pedestrian nature of their thoughts and actions."<sup>55</sup>

Therefore, Khalīfah's linguistic style asserts the ordinariness of her characters, including profuse examples of swearing.<sup>56</sup> This dispersion of "a jolting dose of incantatory curses and mundane profanity . . . and occasionally some Hebrew words"<sup>57</sup>, is considered as strengthening the 'verisimilitude' of Khalīfah's characters. Becker considers the notation of "vulgar speech" as part of the general effort to provide an accurate description of human behaviour and to "free literature once and for all of

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 206. For more information on Palestinian social structure and the necessity of this new linguistic style to reflect the reality of the majority see Ibid, pp. 207-8.

<sup>54</sup> Nazareth, 'An Interview with Sahar Khalifeh', p. 80.

<sup>55</sup> Becker (1980), p. 76. See also Budayr (1981), pp. 117-121.

<sup>56</sup> Khalifah considers herself "one of the first, even among the men writers, to use a lot of words which are supposed to be dirty like 'shit' and 'bitch'." See Nazareth, 'An Interview with Sahar Khalifeh', p. 80.

<sup>57</sup> Siddiq, 'The Fiction of Sahar Khalifah', p. 152.



taboos having to do with four-letter words and sexuality.”<sup>58</sup> Needless to say, such an attitude arouses the opposition of critics as well as audience of which Khalīfah was not spared.<sup>59</sup> Yet, this language asserts Khalīfah’s unique contribution to the ‘language’ of modern Palestinian fiction: “a freedom and versatility of expression which incorporates the idiom and structure of everyday speech with original literary perceptions and style in a refreshingly novel and dynamic awareness of the complexity and variety of language.”<sup>60</sup> The adaptability of Khalīfah’s fictional language asserts the credibility of her characters and events.

Moreover, Khalīfah states that the linguistic method of using Hebrew phrases and idioms works on two levels:

First, putting the reader in the real atmosphere and the situation of the character. Second, these languages are so similar. [Khalifah] refutes the idea that the Arabs are anti-Semitic. . . . So, by using the Hebrew language and by allowing the reader to sense the similarity between the two languages, [she raises] this question about the origin of both languages and the race of both nations. So it is true [that] the two people are closer than they realize they are.<sup>61</sup>

Thus, while this linguistic style emphasises the realism of the narrative it also attempts to reveal the nationalism and racism of both parties. Hence, it confirms Khalīfah’s *realistic nationalism*.

Elsewhere Becker argues in favour of this linguistic practice as a feature of realist literature. He states:

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<sup>58</sup> Becker (1967), p. 27. For more information on linguistic accuracy in realistic novels and its utilisation in reflecting the ‘vulgarity and obscenity’ of lower classes, see Becker (1980), p. 77.

<sup>59</sup> See Nazareth, ‘An Interview with Sahar Khalifeh’, p. 80.

<sup>60</sup> Mikhail-Ashrawi (1982), p. 266. Song considers Khalīfah’s linguistic style unique in the sense that Khalīfah “utilized it more efficiently and pushed it beyond previous boundaries” set by male writers. See Song, ‘The Writing of Sahar Khalifah’, p. 18.

<sup>61</sup> Nazareth, ‘An Interview with Sahar Khalifeh’, pp. 83-4.

A broadly encompassing framework for this movement . . . was the search of ethnic/linguistic minorities for autonomy and cultural recognition. . . . the very act of writing a novel in [a regional dialect] was an assertion of the existence of a variety of human experience which cried out for recognition – an echo on the ethnic level of what was simultaneously taking place on the lower levels of class structure.<sup>62</sup>

Khalīfah occasionally uses the Palestinian dialect of Nablus to portray realistically lower-class characters, who can be seen as minority within their social structure—this kind of employment of a class based dialect is considered necessary in realistic literature. This linguistic representation of lower classes helps in the call for the recognition of their national identity. In a more advanced argument, Song considers Khalīfah’s linguistic venture as a necessary tool to assert both national and feminist identity since “standard Arabic in literature is the language of men rather than of women.”<sup>63</sup> Although the ethnic/minority issue does not apply directly to the novels under study, Song’s argument reveals the need for such linguistic representation in order to highlight further aspects of national and gender identity.

Furthermore, the employment of this innovative linguistic style to emphasise the verisimilitude of the characters is supported by reference to specific cultural aspects of the community which is being described. Zakiyyah is almost always mentioned while smoking her water pipe, a device for smoking that is very popular in the Levant. The description of the rituals of smoking this water pipe stamps the atmosphere with familiarity. Moreover, her characters recite multiple popular stories which have been transmitted in Palestinian and Arab culture for generations. In *Wild Thorns*, Abu Ṣāber tells how passionate he is about folk tales such as Abu Zayd al-Hilālī and ‘Antar Ibn

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<sup>62</sup> Becker (1980), pp. 15-16.

<sup>63</sup> Song, ‘The Writing of Sahar Khalifah’, p. 19.

Shaddād.<sup>64</sup> These examples accentuate the genuine demonstration of realism in Khalīfah's trilogy.

Thus, in her trilogy Khalīfah presents a satisfactory exemplification of some vital characteristics of the realistic novel. The components of events, characterisation, stream of consciousness, and setting and time, are employed within the recognised parameters of realist fiction. In addition, Khalīfah employs colloquial language and depicts cultural specificities in a way which highlights the popularity and familiarity of her characters and settings, which in turn emphasise the realistic features of her trilogy. The following section will highlight some examples of Khalīfah's representations of feminism and Palestinian nationalism through critical realism.

### **REALISTIC NATIONALISM AND REALISTIC FEMINISM IN THE OCCUPIED TERRITORIES**

Khalīfah categorises her novels as socio-political. She asserts that this type of novel “tries to capture life in its changing moods and realities. It reflects a matrix of interrelations between man and society, society and nature, nature and man, man and himself.”<sup>65</sup> This affirms the argument presented above concerning the realistic nature of Khalīfah's trilogy. This method of reflecting reality in literature without necessarily offering straightforward solutions is one of the major characteristics of critical realism. Khalīfah focuses on two major issues in her reflection of reality: Palestinian nationalism and feminism. As I argued above, she is a pioneer in the context of Arab women's

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<sup>64</sup> See Khalīfah (2005), p. 52.

<sup>65</sup> Khalīfeh (1983), p. 44. See also p. 47 where she emphasises this realistic feature of her writings.

writing, including Palestinian, of the introduction of what we might call *realistic nationalism* to the contemporary Palestinian resistance novel in the occupied territories.

On the feminist front, in addition to being a writer, Khalīfah is an active feminist; she founded the Women's Affairs Centre in Nablus.<sup>66</sup> Khalīfah identifies herself as "a Third World feminist who believes in justice and equal opportunities for all people despite differences of class, sex, or color."<sup>67</sup> Her feminist perspectives and attitudes are reflected in her novels. Muhammad Siddiq acknowledges that Khalīfah is the first "major female novelist" to introduce a feminist viewpoint into Palestinian fiction.<sup>68</sup>

Each of the three novels under study represents the reality of women's lives in occupied Palestine within the context of the national struggle against the Israeli occupation. This "double critique" is pointed up by Cooke as specific to some Palestinian women writers in the occupied territories, including Khalīfah. Cooke describes this kind of representation as "the simultaneous criticism of the colonizer as well as of one's own cultural patrimony."<sup>69</sup> In *Wild Thorns* this representation is collective in the sense that there is no focus on one particular female character. Yet in *Sunflower* and *The Gate* there is clear tendency to concentrate more on women's issues through the characters of Rafīf, Sa'diyyah, Samar, and Nuzha. Through these characters Khalīfah highlights Palestinian women's struggles as females in their traditional communities and Palestinians in the occupied territories. Therefore, in Khalīfah's

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<sup>66</sup> For more information please refer to Sherna Berger Gluck, 'Palestinian Women: Gender Politics and Nationalism', *Journal of Palestinian Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (Spring, 1995), pp. 5-15 (15) note 29.

<sup>67</sup> Khalīfeh (1988), p. 53.

<sup>68</sup> Siddiq, 'The Fiction of Sahar Khalifah', p. 156.

<sup>69</sup> Cooke (1996), p. 170.

trilogy the feminist struggle cannot be separated from the nationalist one. In this section I will highlight this correlated representation of feminist and nationalist issues in Khalīfah's trilogy. I will also underline the critical realist features of this representation.<sup>70</sup>

It is noteworthy that Khalīfah can be seen as one of those feminist writers who “offer a vision for men as well as women in which change occurs not only on a personal level but also at a social and political level.”<sup>71</sup> Therefore, Khalīfah's employment of numerable male protagonists in her novels, especially in *Wild Thorns*, does not lessen the feminist nature of her writings. On the contrary, it asserts her feminism since according to Song, a successful feminist novel is the one which transcends women's personal issues to combine social, political, and human struggle.

Although in *Wild Thorns* there is not a specific female character through which to highlight feminist issues, Khalīfah dramatises a few incidents throughout the novel to highlight issues related to Palestinian women. The incident of the torturing of the girl at the checkpoint at the beginning of *Wild Thorns* is important. On the one hand, the figure of the arrested girl introduces from the beginning the activist role certain women took in the resistance movement as early as the period following the 1967 war. On the other hand, the brief description of the torture process when the “female Israeli soldier yelled, ‘Open your legs! Open your legs! I’ve got to see up there!’”<sup>72</sup> illustrates what Harlow

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<sup>70</sup> It is worth mentioning that Khalīfah in her analysis of *Sunflower* and *Memoirs of an Unrealistic Woman* (1983) criticises harshly Marxism and leftist Palestinians through her two female protagonists Rafīf and ‘Afāf. She states that ‘Marxism [while calling form a socialist society] has either avoided the particularities and details of women's issues or ignored them.’ See Khalīfeh (1983), p. 43. Such harsh criticism emphasises, though indirectly, Khalīfah's tendency for critical realism and her rejection of socialist realism especially in her representation of women.

<sup>71</sup> Song, ‘The Writing of Sahar Khalifah’, p. 20.

<sup>72</sup> Khalīfah (2005), p. 14.

describes as “sexual harassment, the ‘manipulation of the Arab notion of ‘female honor,’ [during] Israeli practices of interrogating Palestinian women detainees.”<sup>73</sup> Thus, besides bringing to attention the early participation of young Palestinian women in resistance activities, this example highlights the vulnerability of these women who in their mission carry the double burden of protecting the land and the honour of the family. Through such examples Khalīfah presents feminist issues as parallel to nationalist ones in the lives of Palestinian women in the occupied territories.

In *Sunflower*, the character of Rafīf stands for intellectual women’s affliction in restricted societies. Unlike Sa’diyyah and other women in old-town Nāblus, Rafīf is aware of her rights and of the fact that she is deprived of practicing these rights because of gender discrimination in her traditional patriarchal society. Rafīf’s suffering, however, represents only one strand within society: almost exclusively that of educated, middle-class women. Though she tries through the Women’s Column to represent other women’s dilemmas, her vision can be seen as one-sided. This is illustrated in the final scene when she tries to write a report about Sa’diyyah’s case. The latter is aware that it is not possible for Rafīf to understand, feel, and subsequently represent her pain, while Rafīf believes that their pain is the same since it is caused by the same traditional patriarchal society. This kind of representation asserts the realism of this character since Rafīf is portrayed as an imperfect feminist.

Unlike Rafīf who does not express any interest in participating in the national struggle, Samar from *The Gate*, participates in the fights against the Israeli soldiers. The social sciences graduate finds herself in the middle of the fight during the Israeli

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<sup>73</sup> Harlow, ‘Partitions and Precedents’, p. 128.

soldiers' door-to-door search for fidā'een. She takes part in this fight without hesitation. However, her desire to take part in the national struggle is not accepted by her patriarchal society represented by her brothers. Peteet states that: "[a]s women yearned to join political organizations and contribute to the national struggle, they confronted familial and societal obstacles. The implications of their subordinate position were made clear to them."<sup>74</sup> This is the kind of challenge Samar has to confront. Her social research is based within the limits of the domestic sphere, mainly because her brothers do not accept her social and political activism. For them, she is a young woman who is supposed to abandon her activities and stay at home, since it is the duty of her five brothers to fight for national liberation.<sup>75</sup> Their opposition to her work undermines her activism.

On the other hand, "[n]ew mechanisms of control [by men] rely more on ridicule, censorship, and negative labeling than on the threat of violence or family dishonor. Men intimidate women by poking fun at women's concerns and implying that women's issues are not really 'political' at all."<sup>76</sup> Samar struggles to reconcile her social and political activities with the very limited movement in the space allowed to her by the traditionally gendered hierarchies. Despite Samar's important role during an incident under the imposed curfew, for which she helps destroy the gate and saving Ḥussām, her brother beats her as punishment for being away from the family's house. She realises that "she is trapped in this firm grip of complicated relationships and complexes. In this house she feels not more than an insect trapped in a spider's net. . . .

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<sup>74</sup> Peteet, 'Women and the Palestinian Movement', p. 22.

<sup>75</sup> Khalīfah (1990), p. 134.

<sup>76</sup> Peteet, 'Women and the Palestinian Movement', p. 23

She became the subject of her brothers' mockery while they play cards. She says *al-qami'* (suppress), they say *taqmee' al-bamiyah* (cutting okras in colloquial Levantine).<sup>77</sup> In the small battle with the Israeli soldiers, Samar is able to defend herself against the beatings of the soldiers while attempting to protect her brothers and other male guerrillas. Yet she is unable to protect herself from her brother who represents the authority of her patriarchal society. She surrenders to him while he beats her severely. She realises that:

The more she understands and realizes the reality, the more her burden becomes heavier and the more scared she gets. Now she realizes that change will not happen in the same way as establishing the state. Politics is not the same as morals, religion, or beauty. Politics can be negotiated and determined. But customs, women ... 'Oh sister; the road is long [and] complicated'.<sup>78</sup>

This realisation crystallises Khalīfah's call for liberating women first in order to be able to liberate the land. This call has been articulated by Rafīf. However, Rafīf's realisation remains theoretical while Samar's experience is more practical and effective.

Moreover, through the character of Samar, and by employing such small incidents, Khalīfah illustrates the violence that Palestinian women of lower classes experience as active feminists and as nationalists. While attending meetings at the Women's Institution, Samar discovers the huge difference between her harsh experience as a Palestinian middle-class woman and that of young women from the upper classes. Her traditional neighbourhood imposes more restrictions on women while in upper-class neighbourhoods, women have more freedom of mobility and

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<sup>77</sup> Khalīfah (1990), p. 133. This mockery comes from the fact that in Arabic these two words have the same root and the same rhythm which makes a perfect pun.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., pp. 133-4.



expression. Thus they are incapable of feeling and understanding her pain and suffering. The same issue arose in *Sunflower* through the comparison between Rafif and Sa'diyyah as discussed in the previous chapter. Therefore, the portrayal of Samar is objective in the sense that it discloses all aspects of her struggle as a middle-class young woman who lives in a traditional neighbourhood in old-town Nāblus and resists the restricted patriarchal confinements that limit her feminist and nationalist activities. The language used in her dialogues with her illiterate brothers, the description of material and social settings, and the open ending assert the ordinariness of this character and its subsequent realism.

Accordingly, I consider Khalīfah's representation of Palestinian feminism pioneering in the sense that she introduces *realistic feminism* to Palestinian resistance literature. This type of feminism portrays characters who express genuine engagement in feminist concerns that veer away from theory and dogma and are derived from the reality of their daily struggle, which in turn is interlinked with other essential struggles such as the major nationalist one. In this sense *realistic feminism* is a more human account of Third World feminisms which encompass different human aspects of women's struggles by transcending the traditional calls for women's rights to include other rights such as nationalist ones.

Therefore, in Khalīfah's trilogy, *realistic feminism* characterises simultaneously feminist and nationalist causes. This highlights the urgent need to advocate women's liberation as a necessary prerequisite in order to liberate the land. One of the outstanding features of *realistic feminism*, as portrayed by Khalīfah, is the employment of male characters in this literary delineation as means of asserting the humane

dimensions of this feminism. Ḥussām for instance, wonders “who is responsible and to be blamed for prostitution? Poor blond Sakīnah or Ḥāj Iskandar and al-Marbūt?”<sup>79</sup> The first is a rich tradesman who has done the duty of pilgrimage to Makhah and subsequently is supposed to be respectful and religious person. He, however, used to attend the house of ill-repute secretly. The second is a leader among the guerrilla fighters. He took Nuzha as a mistress and used her to execute a number of operations against the Israeli occupier. He, however, did not defend her when she was arrested, mainly because she is seen as a prostitute from the house of ill-repute. Thus al-Marbūt will not be judged by mistreating a prostitute even though she loved him and helped in his resistance activities. Ḥussām’s stay at Nuzha’s makes him aware of the fact that she is a victim of patriarchal customs that are abusive and label her negatively.

In the same way, ‘Ādil realises that the society is demanding too much from women without giving them that much in return. As an intellectual, he wants Rafīf to be independent. However, her independence means that she becomes more powerful than he thought she will be. He contemplates:

Is that why it is hard for men to apply their liberating principles to women? Do they fear that she will become stronger than them and accustomed to surviving on her own, without their protection. This makes life a lot tougher. Men feel strong and their hearts become tendered when women seek refuge with them. Yet, it comes with a very high price: men’s freedom. What a trick! His freedom! Her freedom!<sup>80</sup>

‘Ādil’s contemplation reveals the fact that for patriarchal society to allow women any freedom means depriving men of some of their power. This is a tough equation to be

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 171.

<sup>80</sup> Khalīfah (1987), p. 251.

implemented, even by intellectuals. This representation of nationalist men's attitudes—whether as intellectuals or guerrilla fighters—towards feminist issues re-emphasises the inseparable link between nationalist struggles and feminist ones in the occupied territories. Women's awareness of their subordination and the need to break out of the limitations imposed on their participation in social and political activities are required by both men and women in order to achieve social and political change.<sup>81</sup> Khalīfah resorts to *realistic feminism* in her proclamation of the necessity of women's liberation to achieve national liberation.

Moreover, Khalīfah employs the same language and method of description to portray other characters who can be seen as nationalist characters. As I argued above, in this trilogy, Khalīfah employs what we might call *realistic nationalism* which has been presented through numerous characters. Usāmah, Bāssel, and Šālīḥ, in addition to 'Ādil and Ḥussām, are male characters whose actions and attitudes reflect resistance activities and Palestinian nationalism. These characters are portrayed in a realistic manner since the same language and method of description is used in reflecting them. Generally speaking, Palestinian nationalism is at the centre of Khalīfah's trilogy. The general background in the three novels revolves around the struggle of Palestinians to gain the return of their occupied lands, covering the period starting from the aftermath of the 1967 *naksah* until the eruption of first Intifada in 1987. Therefore, *realistic nationalism* is one of the distinctive literary marks of this trilogy.

I observe Khalīfah's portrayal of these feminist and nationalist characters as a form of critical realist representation. Her characters remain consistent in their views

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<sup>81</sup> For more information on women's agency in wars perpetuated by men see Cooke (1996), p. 218.

and attitudes throughout the narrative. Ḥussām's and 'Ādil's new awareness of their society's responsibility towards women's subordination comes naturally after a long process through which they learn how to value the women around them differently. Thus, the change of their attitude is not sudden or unexpected. Moreover, these characters express their objectives, views, disappointments, and other thoughts mainly through interior monologues. Hence the characteristic of stream of consciousness is evident throughout.

Furthermore, the above examples illustrate that the feminist-nationalist awareness is achieved through the presentations of exterior factors as “minor happenings” in the lives of these characters—it is considered minor in relation to the major political events. In realistic literature, such exterior factors are used as “points of departure for the development of motifs, for a penetration which opens up new perspectives into a milieu or a consciousness or the given historical setting.”<sup>82</sup> Therefore, Khalīfah's style in representing such realisations is realistic since she employs minor events to expose social reality by delving into the consciousness of her characters and relating it to the general political reality.

Khalīfah's detailed description of events that illustrate both feminist and nationalist causes—such as the women's first fight with Israeli soldiers in *The Gate*, when Samar is beaten by her brother, or the incident when Usāmah assassinates the Israeli officer and later blows up the Israeli buses in *Wild Thorns*—are described in a language that creates a realistic atmosphere. Mixed between modern standard Arabic and Palestinian vernacular, Khalīfah's characters speak the every-day language with all

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<sup>82</sup> Auerbach (1953), p. 547.

its polite and rude expressions, curses, metaphors, folk songs, and popular ballads of resistance against the Israelis. The incidents have been masterfully evoked through smells and sounds that complete the picture realistically. This kind of comprehensive description of events and characters stamps Khalīfah's work with what can only be termed a realistic atmosphere.

Khalīfah's realism remains critical in the sense that she does not suggest solutions to the problems tackled in her novels. Her representation of Palestinian societal and political issues is a reflection of daily realities in occupied Palestine without any implication of the necessity of socialist society as a solution to the feminist and nationalist struggles under study. Instead, she calls for attention to be given to the necessity of liberating women in order to liberate the land and the simultaneous necessity of liberating the Israelis in order to liberate the Palestinians. That is why she is interested in having her work read by the Israelis. In a way, she is calling for a 'human solution' that deals with all aspects of suppression in order to achieve a collective freedom.<sup>83</sup> Therefore, Khalīfah can be considered one of the first Arab women writers to implement simultaneously feminist and nationalist concerns according to the critical realist trend while introducing the literary styles of *realistic feminism* and *realistic nationalism* to the genre of Palestinian resistance literature.

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<sup>83</sup> See Nazareth, 'An Interview with Sahar Khalifeh', p. 82.

## CONCLUSION

Following on from the previous chapter in which I demonstrate some of the primary characteristics and components of critical realist fiction and illustrate its application by Khalīfah in her trilogy, in this chapter I present a more detailed analysis of Khalīfah's implementations of this trend. In her trilogy, Khalīfah manifests some of the more specific components through which a realistic novel achieves verisimilitude. In this chapter I illustrate Khalīfah's utilisation of narrative techniques such as events, characterisation, stream of consciousness, and setting and time through numerous examples from Khalīfah's trilogy. Furthermore, I argue that Khalīfah pioneers in introducing a new linguistic style in which she mixes Palestinian vernacular with modern standard Arabic and Hebrew expressions as means of emphasising the realism of her characters and events. Therefore, I consider Khalīfah as a pioneer among Arab women writers in her demonstration of critical realist aesthetics in her representation of feminism and Palestinian nationalism.

In this regard, I highlight *realistic nationalism* which is introduced in the previous chapter as a term by which to refer to the literary representation of Palestinian national affiliation in a way that does not conflict with the surrounding human and social realities. I also propose *realistic feminism* as a new term to describe Khalīfah's realistic representation of Palestinian feminism which transcends the more traditional feminisms of the Third World to include more human aspects of women's struggle. This proposition is based on Khalīfah's masterful implementation of the main characteristics of literary critical realism. Thus, Khalīfah's narration of Palestinian pain and resistance

is done by means of critical realism. The simultaneous representation of nationalism and feminism as two major aspects of the Palestinian reality in the occupied territories renders Khalīfah's trilogy as a distinguished avant-garde achievement among the writings of contemporary Palestinian women in particular and of Arab women in general.

## CONCLUSION

In her 1995 study of 'Feminists, Islam, and the Nation', Margot Badran stated that the "story of Arab feminism is a story of intersections between feminisms and nationalisms—both those identified with individual Arab countries and those transcending territorial boundaries."<sup>1</sup> The political situation in the Middle East during the twentieth century had a profound impact on the position and role of women in their societies, for times of war and national crises disrupt traditional social structures and impose new challenges that often require women's participation to ensure the community's survival. During the most prominent examples of such political turmoil in the modern history of the Levant—the Lebanese civil war and the Palestinian Intifada—Arab women writers were enabled to explore and reflect on how each war had radically changed their roles, transforming them from passive, silent witnesses into active participants in the war. These women writers chose to register the war from dual perspectives: from the point of view of their own experience firstly as women, and

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<sup>1</sup> Badran (1995), p. 223.



secondly as citizens. This experiential fusion renders their work as a collective portrait of wartime, as this thesis has argued, from both feminist and nationalist perspectives.

In her study of the Beirut Decentrists, Miriam Cooke acknowledges that the civil war in Lebanon

had opened up a new arena of expression, given them a voice in what had until then been a male-dominated field. Through their writings, these women were telling their own lives for the first time. Their lives had acquired urgency as the war seeped into every corner of people's existence, never allowing responsibility to lie anywhere but squarely with those who allowed it to happen and to persist.<sup>2</sup>

Whilst using Cook's account to discuss Lebanese women's writings in this thesis, I have also chosen to apply her account of women's experience in the Lebanese civil war to my analysis of writings by Palestinian women during the Intifada. The nature of these two nationalist crises provided, and continues to provide women with a singular opportunity to write about their lives as women; and, in so doing, to claim, or perhaps even to reclaim, their national and gender identities. The framework of these nationalist crises offers a medium through which these women can deepen their articulation of a different series of discriminatory and oppressive structures on the basis of gender, sexuality, and class. Consequently, the "war and the pen have allowed women to overcome outsidership, to participate in the possible reshaping of society."<sup>3</sup> Arab women who write about the Lebanese war and the Palestinian Intifada undertake the task of re-constructing social structures by re-defining women's roles as active participants in the new structures. Therefore, these women writers establish in their

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<sup>2</sup> Cooke (1988), p. 166.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 156.

writings an inseparable link between feminist and nationalist causes in the Levant that was brought into being by the political conflicts themselves.

In this thesis, I have endeavoured to examine a number of the novels of Ghādah al-Sammān and Saḥar Khalīfah; the work of both engages in this literary dynamic between nationalist and feminist struggles in Lebanon and Palestine, respectively. Both writers challenge long-established literary traditions by advancing these themes in particular artistic styles and practices which have here been defined as those of literary existentialism and realism. I have argued that al-Sammān and Khalīfah are *avant-gardes* for they move the writings of Levantine women to a new level by adding these innovative literary forms to the repertoire of contemporary Arab women's writings.

Therefore, I offer in this thesis a newly conceptualised and carefully detailed close analysis of the representation of feminism and nationalism in the works of these two major writers. I have been concerned to show how, in their response to the political turmoil in the Middle East, contemporary Arab women writers render reality in creative forms: al-Sammān cries for freedom by exploiting literary existentialism to reflect the human struggle against the backdrop of the Lebanese civil war, while Khalīfah employs critical realism in her portrayal of human pain and suffering during the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in occupied Palestine. I consider this a manifestation of the avant-gardism of both writers by means of going beyond what I have defined as the *vicious cycle mode* to introduce new literary forms to the mainstream of contemporary Arab women's writings. Therefore, as a means of conceptualising this fusion of aesthetic and political practices I propose the terms *existentialist Arab feminism*, *existentialist*

*nationalism, realistic feminism, and realistic nationalism* as helpful categories by which to describe and understand their creative literary achievements.

It is my hope that these findings will provide a better understanding and appreciation of the writings of contemporary Arab women and the role of Arab women in the structuring and survival of their communities, particularly during national crises. But the topic does not necessarily end here. My findings have, I hope, not only offered a fuller and more integrated understanding of these writers, and the interconnected political and aesthetic strategies which give their work such an ethical urgency, but also laid the groundwork for future research on similar areas of concern. Four such directions suggest themselves.

For example, one might profitably pursue an investigation of the *vicious cycle mode* and the transformation or development of different types of Arab feminism (Levantine in particular), within and outside this mode. One could also use this study as a point of departure for a comparative study of the employment of literary existentialism and realism by male and female writers in their portrayal of national crises in the Arab world, or by comparing the employment of these literary styles by women writers in the Mashriq and women writers in North Africa during times of war. Another possible outcome of this study is to advance further research on other innovative literary styles employed by women writers in their representations of feminism and nationalism in the Mashriq, especially among the *avant-gardes*. Last but not least, one could employ the arguments advanced in this thesis to instigate a study of further implications of feminisms and nationalisms in the contemporary writings of Arab women, especially in the Mashriq. For instance, one may examine whether these

types of feminisms include the representations of homosexual women and whether the portrayal of these nationalisms could include other ethnic minorities who have been residing in the Mashriq for decades such as Kurds and Armenians.

For all the attention to literary style and theory and to women's rights, we should not lose sight of the larger message of these works, or the often brutal and harrowing realities which they reflect. War and suffering are enduring human concerns and, though it may be too much to believe that they can be stopped or prevented by the artistic works which hold a mirror up to them, we should at least hope that such writings can put a human face on the pain, suffering, and social change that are often the consequences of armed conflict.



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